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## **"Pray for Me and My Kids": Correspondence between Rural Black Women and White Northern Women During the Civil Rights Movement**

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“Pray for Me and My Kids”:  
Correspondence between Rural Black Women and Northern White Women  
During the Civil Rights Movement

A Thesis

Submitted to the Graduate Faculty of the  
University of New Orleans  
in partial fulfillment of the  
requirements for the degree of

Master of Arts  
in  
History

by

Pamela Walker

B.A. University of Tennessee, 2011

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## **Acknowledgments**

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On a personal note, my family has been my inspiration for telling this story. Grandmother, you are the reason I discovered this amazing Project. Thanks for being open sharing your story. Karena and Derek, thanks for holding down the fort back home so little sister could follow her dreams. Mommy, I am so grateful for your full support in everything! None of this would have been possible with you! And finally, to Daddy, I miss you. You poured words of affirmation over me from the time I was little girl. Those words are forever with me and imbued in the pages of this project.



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## **Abstract**

This paper examines the experiences of rural black women in Mississippi during the Civil Rights Movement by examining correspondence of the grassroots anti-poverty organization the Box Project. The Box Project, founded in 1962 by white Vermont resident and radical activist Virginia Naeve, provided direct relief to black families living in Mississippi but also opened positive and clandestine lines of communication between southern black women and outsiders, most often white women. The efforts of the Box Project have been largely left out of the dialogue surrounding Civil Rights, which has often been dominated by leading figures, major events and national organizations. This paper seeks to understand the discreet but effective ways in which some black women, though constrained by motherhood, abject poverty, and rural isolation participated in the Civil Rights Movement, and how black and white women worked together to chip away at the foundations of inequality that Jim Crow produced.

## *Keywords*

Activism, African American History, Civil Rights Movement, Mississippi, Motherhood, Poverty, Resistance, Social Movements, Southern History, Women and Gender

## Introduction

In January of 1965, Mississippi resident Mary Taylor wrote a letter to a Vermont woman she had never met. Mary's letter of gratitude, perhaps written at the kitchen table with her youngest child resting in her lap, read in part:

Dear Friends,

I recived your letter and was glad to hear from you I got the \$2.00 you sent me it help us out so muck. You see we live on a farm and the Boss man lend us the money to buy food in December to last until April or May that is when work began on the farm so you know that thir is no spending money for food that run out [or] for the children school papper and pincil...My hubon has been able to find work in town in winter but this year he has not. You see we tried to ready to vote now we can't get help when we need it... The money [Boss man] lent us didnt buy enough food to last but I know we have got to live somehow... We hear that it will get better soon if thir anything that i could do I am willing. If it good. We love everybody and we know that thir are good white and black people in the world. And thir or bad white and black. We go to church Sunday and pray for our country we want peace and happiness and to lean to love one another...<sup>1</sup>

You have probably never heard of Mary Taylor from Itta Bena (Leflore County), Mississippi. She did not march from Memphis to Jackson. She did not canvass in the Delta. She did not sit-in at a Woolworth's lunch counter. Mary was the mother of six children living off of five to six dollars a week trapped in the life of a sharecropper's wife and indebted to a man she

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<sup>1</sup> Mary Taylor to "Friends" (Probably Virginia Naeve), January 1965, Box Project Collection, Delta State University, Cleveland, Mississippi (Hereafter BPC).

A note on transcription: This work would not be possible without the letter correspondence between southern black women and northern white women. I have chosen to transcribe the letters literally rather than edit the text of the letters for two reasons. First, the voices of these women have been hidden for nearly fifty years. Unaltered, the idiosyncrasies of their writing communicate a fullness of the rural black experience almost as much the actual meaning behind the words themselves. Second, transcribing the letters as they are illuminates the disparate conditions under which the Northern and Southern women chose to communicate. Despite low literacy rates and underfunded education systems, Southern women, fully aware of these inequalities, still chose to communicate with their northern counterparts through letter writing. In some instances when understanding the meaning of the transcribed text may be in question, I have chosen to provide for the reader clarification (indicated by bracketed text).

called “boss man.” These constraints kept her from participating in such protests. The disparate Mississippi movement was inspired by the struggles of many voiceless and oppressed rural black women such as Mary living in Jim Crow South. Still, half a century later, as the nation commemorates major Civil Rights events that foreshadowed voting rights legislation, their unfiltered voices have yet to be heard. Mentioned only in passing and identified in photographs as bystanders or onlookers, rural black women were often doing much more than sitting on porches waving at marchers.<sup>2</sup> Many were engaged in a clandestine war of resistance and a day-to-day negotiation for survival. This paper will use an overlooked but rich source of primary material to reveal the experiences of rural black women during the Civil Rights movement and to explore how the constraints of the domestic realm, motherhood, and class influenced their level of participation in a violent and often male-dominated struggle. Although many historians have overlooked the experiences and actions of rural black women in the traditional Civil Rights narrative, therefore rendering them as unaware or apathetic to the struggle, this paper will demonstrate, using their own voices, how rural black women did participate in the movement, often acting as *activist mothers*, by advocating for the resources of their family and community, by sending communiqués to Northern outsiders, thus drawing attention to the southern plight, and by engaging in day-to-day resistance (or negotiation) with the racist white power structure of Jim Crow South.

This work will explore the participation of rural black women in Mississippi and more specifically the Mississippi Delta, an area that has been defined geographically as the diamond

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<sup>2</sup> Holland Carter, “A Long March Into History: Stephen Somerstein Photos in ‘Freedom Journey 1965’” *The New York Times*, January 15, 2015, accessed February 1, 2015. [http://www.nytimes.com/2015/01/16/arts/design/stephen-somerstein-photos-in-freedom-journey-1965.html?emc=eta1&\\_r=0#](http://www.nytimes.com/2015/01/16/arts/design/stephen-somerstein-photos-in-freedom-journey-1965.html?emc=eta1&_r=0#).

shaped swath of rich land that runs along the Mississippi River from Memphis, Tennessee, to Vicksburg, Mississippi, and has been defined metaphorically, in the words of historian James C. Cobb, as “the most southern place on earth.”<sup>3</sup> The area has had an ominous history of racial oppression, segregation, and economic disparity among blacks beginning from the moment slavery moved westward toward the Mississippi River in the early nineteenth century. At the turn of the twentieth century, sharecropping and tenant farming replaced slavery as the South’s Jim Crow laws ensured a racialized caste system regardless of economic status.

Those who were not able to migrate North in search of better jobs and more opportunities during the first part of the century were forced to navigate the repressive terrain as second-class citizens with little protection from all-white governing powers and racist vigilantes. The oppression is evident in the numbers: By 1954 only 4 percent of eligible blacks in the state were registered to vote; the infant mortality rate for blacks in the Delta was 30 percent higher than blacks in other parts of the state and 106 percent higher than Delta whites, and in 1959, the median income for black farm laborers was six hundred dollars per year, nine hundred dollars less than their white counterparts. The growing mechanization of the cotton industry in the 1960s did not help rural blacks but rather drove them further into poverty and government dependency.<sup>4</sup> Around the same time, Civil Rights activists made their way to the state to overturn Jim Crow; however, racist vigilantes sought violence to maintain the status quo. The escalated racial tension and a series of high profile killings brought intensive media attention to

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<sup>3</sup> James C. Cobb, *The Most Southern Place on Earth: The Mississippi Delta and the Roots of Regional Identity* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1992), 3.

<sup>4</sup> John Dittmer, *Local People: The Struggle for Civil Rights in Mississippi* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1995), 52; Cobb, *The Most Southern Place on Earth*, 263, 254-255.

the state. Such was the social landscape of the rural black women discussed in this paper who, along with their families, daily faced overwhelming uncertainty and poverty under the constant threat of violence or death.

This paper seeks to add to the growing body of work by historians and sociologists focused on exhuming black women's voices from the depths of historical anonymity. Sociologists Bernice McNair Barnett and Belinda Robnett have investigated black women's varying degrees of Civil Rights participation during the southern movement. Barnett argues that black women's leadership was suppressed so that their male counterparts could be exalted. Women involved in the movement, Barnett contends, operated under the "triple" constraints of gender, race, and class further reinforced by the patriarchal dominance of the black church. Robnett's work argues that because of the gendered nature of the movement and society at large, women "were often channeled away from formal leadership positions [in male-dominated organizations] and confined to informal levels of leadership." This meant women often served as intermediary leaders, or "bridge leaders," especially in the rural movements of Mississippi and Alabama.<sup>5</sup>

Because of the constraints on women's participation and the limited opportunities for women to rise in the ranks as leaders in national organizations such as the Southern Christian Leadership Conference (SCLC), the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee (SNCC), and the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP), black women often sought autonomy within their own woman-led and women-focused organizations. These organizations often partnered and mobilized across the color line in the struggle for freedom.

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<sup>5</sup> Bernice McNair Barnett, "Invisible Southern Black Women Leaders in the Civil Rights Movement: Triple Constraints of Gender, Race, and Class," *Gender and Society*, vol. 7, no. 2 (June 1993), 174; Belinda Robnett, *How Long? How Long? African American Women and the Struggle for Civil Rights* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1999), 167.

The National Council of Negro Women (NCNW), League of Women's Voters (LWV), and the YWCA are but a few examples of such organizations. Historians Debbie Harwell and Tiyi Morris's research has exposed the ways in which local women organized in Mississippi through the Wednesdays in Mississippi initiative and Clarie Collins Harvey's organization, Womanpower Unlimited. Adding to the belief that black women served as the backbone to the larger movement's success, these projects, under the partial direction of Harvey, a Jackson, Mississippi, businesswoman, brought together middle-class black and white women to engage in movement dialogue.<sup>6</sup> By illustrating how women served as outright leaders in the movement and bolstered a desire for Civil Rights participation in the hearts of ordinary people in the community, Harwell and Morris contribute to a more layered understanding on women's activism in Mississippi.<sup>7</sup>

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<sup>6</sup> See also Charles Payne, "Men Led, But Women Organized: Movement Participation of Women in the Mississippi Delta," in Crawford, Vicki L., Rouse, Jacqueline Anne, Woods, Barbara, *Women in the Civil Rights Movement: Trailblazers and Torchbearers, 1941-1965* (Brooklyn: Carlson Publishing Series, 1990), 2, 175-177. For more on women's interracial organizing during the Civil Rights Era, see Shannon Frystak, *Our Minds on Freedom: Women and the Struggle for Black Equality in Louisiana, 1924-1967* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana University Press, 2009).

<sup>7</sup> Debbie Z. Harwell, "Wednesdays in Mississippi: Uniting Women Across Regional and Racial Lines, Summer 1964," *Journal of Southern History*, vol. 76, no. 3 (August 2010), 619; Tiyi Morris, "Clarie Collins Harvey: the Transformative Vision of a World Citizen," *Journal of African American Studies*, vol. 17, issue 3 (September 2013), 288. For more information on local freedom movements see Jeanne Theoharis, *Groundwork Local Black Freedom Movements in America* (New York: New York University, 2005), 194, and Patricia Hill Collins, *Black Feminist Thought Knowledge, Consciousness, and the Politics of Empowerment. Rev. 10th Anniversary ed.* (New York: Routledge, 2000). See also Deborah Gray White, *Too Heavy a Load: Black Women in Defense of Themselves 1894-1994* (New York W.W. Norton, 1999), 194-196, for more information on NCNW and WIMS. Deborah Gray White acknowledges the interracial work of WIMS as an organization that grew from another organization called Women in Community Service. WIMS branched out to smaller Mississippi towns encouraging black women to vote and promoted interracial cooperation. See also Rebecca Tuuri, "Building Bridges of Understanding: The Activism Wednesdays in Mississippi," (PhD diss., Rutgers University, 2012). Tiyi Morris, *Womanpower Unlimited and the Black Freedom Struggle in Mississippi*



While the recent works of historians in the area of black women's experiences and Civil Rights participation has been groundbreaking in getting closer to a more complete understanding of the Civil Rights movement, there is still a layer that remains unearthed. Stories about how black women experienced the Civil Rights movement in Mississippi should be told not only from the perspective of the self-proclaimed, middle-class local protester, or the young activist, temporarily transplanted to the frontlines in Mississippi for a summer or two. A deeper understanding of the movement and those it sought to serve could be reached by asking how sharecroppers and domestic workers living in the rural areas navigated the oppressive Southern terrain. Historians should also consider how those women with maternal and domestic responsibilities participated in the movement under considerable constraints.<sup>8</sup>

A window into the lives of these women has been granted through a grassroots antipoverty organization called The Box Project. The Box Project, founded by radical Vermont activist Virginia Naeve in 1963, provided direct relief in the form of clothing and nonperishable goods to black families living in rural Mississippi through what Naeve called "person to person" donations. At that time, Mississippi's local governing powers, pressured by white Citizen Councils, had cut off commodities in response to black voting drives of 1963. The suspension of rations made outside donations imperative to the survival of poor Mississippians. The Project

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(Athens: University of Georgia Press, 2015), 148. Additionally, Tiyi Morris's recently published book on Clarie Collins Harvey and the Black freedom struggle adds to the conversation of black women's civil rights participation. The book even lends a few of its pages to a brief history of the Box Project from the perspective of its influential founders and coordinators, Virginia Naeve, Myrtle Lane, Claire Collins Harvey, and Coretta Scott King.

<sup>8</sup> I am considering the constraints of women who were mothers (biological) and also those women who may have had maternal duties due to the caretaking of younger siblings or "adopted" children from a family member – i.e. a grandmother caring for grandchildren or an aunt responsible for nieces and nephews.

matched a Southern family with a family in the Northeast, the Midwest, or California, making them “sister families.”<sup>9</sup> The primary donors of goods through the Box Project were white housewives living in the Northeast. Over time, what sometimes developed from the need-based exchanges were long-distance epistolary friendships between the over 300 northern white women and approximately 1,500 black southerners.

The Box Project reveals the amiable correspondence that pushed back at the institutionalized racism and segregation embedded in southern society by creating a covert space for black and white women to candidly communicate. Built through this exchange of goods and information was a platform for women to voice their opinions on the heinous events occurring in the South. This outlet was a particularly freeing space for black women who risked certain reprisal for any public evidence of dissent. A closer look at the content of this correspondence exposes the daily reality of poor black women in Mississippi. It reveals their hopes for a better future for their children and themselves. It also conveys their dissatisfaction with the southern status quo and the covert ways in which they resisted oppression for survival.<sup>10</sup>

### **The Origins of The Box Project**

The founder of the Box Project, Virginia Naeve, remains a relatively obscure figure in Civil Rights history and many details about her life remain unknown. Personal writings offer glimpses into the life of an aspiring artist, global peace advocate, a civil rights activist, and a networking antipoverty organizer. Her writings, in the form of newspaper articles, newsletters,

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<sup>9</sup> Clarie Collins Harvey, “Women as Social Activists in Church Based Movements,” copy of report given at King Center, October 12-15, 1988, Atlanta, Georgia, BPC.

<sup>10</sup> Virginia Naeve, “How did the Box Project Begin,” n.d., BPC.

and two published books, disclose the ties that bound her childhood and young-adulthood to the founding of the Box Project.

Born Virginia Paccassi on December 17, 1921, in Chamberlain, South Dakota, Naeve spent much of her childhood in Oklahoma.<sup>11</sup> A child of the Great Depression, Naeve witnessed the poverty and desperation of those she described as “Grapes of Wrath people.” The scenes of men living in packing crates and barefoot children in rags with runny noses became etched in her memory, surely becoming the impetus for much of her activism later in life.<sup>12</sup> For a brief period in the 1940s, after her first marriage, Naeve moved to New York City to pursue life as an artist – poverty “by choice” she called it. She stayed in a tiny flat through a “divorce, a new relationship, and a second child” then “homesteaded in Vermont” in 1948.<sup>13</sup> After the transition, Virginia and her husband, Lowell Naeve, settled into their Vermont home and became reputable members of the New England community as artists and activists.<sup>14</sup>

Virginia Naeve’s rise to prominence as a peace activist appears to have happened somewhat suddenly. It is possible that Naeve’s husband influenced her emergent pacifist

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<sup>11</sup> Tiyi Morris, *Womanpower Unlimited and the Black Freedom Struggle in Mississippi* (Athens: University of Georgia Press, 2015), 148. The Catholic University of America features a digital exhibit of Virginia Paccassi’s work in their online database <http://cuexhibits.wrlc.org/exhibits/show/strishock/artists-mr/paccassi>. Included in the description of her work is autobiographical information about her early life as an artist and information about her husband, Lowell Naeve. Accessed by author March 13, 2015.

<sup>12</sup> Virginia Naeve, “How did the Box Project Begin,” n.d., BPC.

<sup>13</sup> Virginia Naeve, “How did the Box Project Begin,” n.d., BPC; Morris, *Womanpower Unlimited*, 149.

<sup>14</sup> *Justseeds Artist Cooperative Blog*, “Lowell Naeve’s Phantasies of a Prisoner,” posted by Molly Fair, February 1, 2008, accessed by author Oct. 28 2014. Naeve and her family lived in Woodstock, VT, and Jamaica, VT. It is unclear when the family changed locations; however, in October 1965 Naeve’s family immigrated to Canada to avoid sons’ conscription in Vietnam War.

sentiments. While serving four and a half years in prison for resisting the draft during WWII, Lowell Naeve became involved in political protest and activism. He objected to the segregation of black prisoners, censorship, “the celebration of war in children’s books,” and America’s control over foreign resources. He was also behind the circulation of a prison newsletter called *The Clink* and later published a book entitled *A Field of Broken Stones* about his time spent in prison.<sup>15</sup> Lowell’s marriage to Virginia in the mid-1940s did not halt his activism but rather provided him with a partner just as passionate about peace and equality.<sup>16</sup>

By the early 1960s, Virginia Naeve had built a sturdy foundation of connections to figures as notable and controversial as Ann Braden and Howard Zinn, the latter being a contributor to a collection of essays edited by Naeve entitled *Change OVER: The Drive for Peace*.<sup>17</sup> Ever asking the question “What [can] we do in our community,” Naeve mobilized a local peace group in her Woodstock, Vermont, community to protest the Vietnam War. On January 15, 1962, Naeve, accompanied by a member from her newly formed peace organization and a photographer, headed to Washington, D.C. for the first Women’s Strike for Peace March. Naeve gained notoriety in the New England area after her traveling companion’s photos of the demonstrations were published in local papers. According to Naeve, the photos served as the

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<sup>15</sup> *Justseeds Artist Cooperative Blog*, “Lowell Naeve’s Phantasies of a Prisoner,” posted by Molly Fair. Lowell Naeve, *A Field of Broken Stones* (Boulder Colorado: Swallow Paperbacks, 1959).

<sup>16</sup> Morris, *Womanpower Unlimited*, 149. According to the recent work of historian Tiyi Morris, Virginia and Lowell Naeve met in 1946 and moved to Vermont in 1948. The exact date of their marriage is still unclear.

<sup>17</sup> Virginia Naeve, *CHANGEVER: The Drive for Peace* (Denver: Allan Swallow, 1963); Ann Braden to Virginia Naeve, August 29, 1962, BPC.

only coverage of the march in the New England area.<sup>18</sup> After the local publicity, Naeve embarked on speaking engagements at peace council meetings and high schools in the Vermont and New Hampshire area and sponsored a forum at Dartmouth on the dangers of nuclear war.<sup>19</sup>

Naeve's significant impact on the New England pacifist community spurred an invitation from the Women's Strike for Peace organization for her to serve on a council of fifty American women traveling to Geneva, Switzerland, for disarmament talks in April of 1962.<sup>20</sup> This trip would be the springboard for the Box Project, if Naeve could gather the funds to attend. Naeve explains the chain of events in a chapter of the book *Change OVER*:

They wanted a rural woman and one of low income – I fitted [sic] both categories. I had \$5.75 precisely at that moment, but I said I would go and would try to raise the fare. I wrote seventeen letters asking for help. Fourteen sent me money. As soon as I sent off the letters I applied for a passport. I wasn't sure I would use it, but I wanted to be ready. I was not disappointed.<sup>21</sup>

Naeve's ability to garner support through grassroots mobilization via pen and paper would come in handy later as her motivations for peace activism converged with Civil Rights Movement.

The journey to Geneva allowed Naeve to extend her activist connections beyond the New England pacifist community to two southern-based Civil Rights activists: Clarie Collins Harvey of Jackson, Mississippi, and Coretta Scott King of Atlanta, Georgia, who were the only African American women on the trip.<sup>22</sup> Over the course of the trip, the women engaged in numerous discussions about the Civil Rights and peace movements, eventually becoming united in the

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<sup>18</sup> Naeve, *CHANGEOVER*, 153.

<sup>19</sup> Ibid.

<sup>20</sup> Naeve, *CHANGEOVER*, 174; Naeve, "How Did the Box Project Begin," BPC.

<sup>21</sup> Naeve, *CHANGEOVER*, 160.

<sup>22</sup> Naeve, "How Did the Box Project Begin," BPC.

belief that “war and segregation were part of the same fabric of man’s inhumanity against man.”<sup>23</sup> When Naeve returned to the States, she remained in contact with Harvey and King, writing them for updates about the movement occurring in the South. Naeve was not affluent and lived in an area of Vermont she described as a “strictly white area...the nearest Negro being seventeen miles away.”<sup>24</sup> Wondering how she could improve southern poverty, especially among disenfranchised black populations, Naeve decided to write her correspondents in Mississippi and Georgia for the name and address of a family that she could help. In 1963, Naeve began sending the first boxes of clothing and nonperishable food to a sharecropping family in Georgia. Correspondence with a poverty-stricken family in Mississippi soon followed.<sup>25</sup> The simple concept of individuals directly sending boxes filled with the immediate needs of southern families became the foundation of the Box Project.

A short time after Naeve’s first few boxes were sent, a friend saw Naeve preparing packages for the families and asked Naeve about “adopting” a Southern family of her own, preferably one with a six-year-old boy. Naeve delivered and they both began sending monthly packages South.<sup>26</sup> With each package, letters of thanks and gratitude made their way North, eventually blossoming into affable correspondence between unlikely pen pals. In essence, this is how the project grew. Naeve explained, “As time went on, I became aware that there were many rural people in the North who felt keenly about the injustices in the South and who would like to

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<sup>23</sup> Virginia Naeve, “The Mississippi Box Project or Person-to-Person Help,” *Fellowship*, May 1966, BPC.

<sup>24</sup> Virginia Naeve, “What Can We (I) Do,” *MANAS Journal*, vol. 18, no. 28 (July 1965), 1-4.

<sup>25</sup> Naeve, “How Did the Box Project Begin,” BPC.

<sup>26</sup> Jo Ann and T. Charles Strohn, “Hand to Hand Combat in the War on Poverty,” *This Week Magazine*, April 13, 1969, 9, BPC.

help.”<sup>27</sup> Thus, the Box Project started out as an opportunity for rural people in the North and South to find common ground. Naeve’s neighbors, friends, and extended community members reached out to her desiring to “adopt” a Southern family of their own. As the appeal grew, Naeve and her family decided to throw a Civil Rights Fair in the summer of 1964 for the residents of her Jamaica, Vermont, community. The cost of admission was nonperishable food items or clothing to be sent to the South. Naeve commissioned her artist friends to sell some of their pieces at auction, and a folksinger friend provided the entertainment. According to Naeve, the single-day event was a great success, raising \$1,104 and gathering enough goods to fill 250 boxes.<sup>28</sup> The commodities took nearly six months to sort through and pack up, culminating in a holiday drive for community members to pick up a box from Naeve’s house and, with their own postage money, send “a box of cheer to a family down South.”<sup>29</sup> This event marked the initial matching of Northern white families with Southern black families. Once Naeve paired a family with a northern correspondent, there were only two requirements for each party: the Northern donor must include paper, pencil, and a stamped envelope in the package sent south, and the Southern family must write back upon receipt of the box.<sup>30</sup>

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<sup>27</sup> Naeve, “The Mississippi Box Project,” *Fellowship*, BPC.

<sup>28</sup> Naeve, “How Did the Box Project Begin,” BPC; Naeve, “The Mississippi Box Project,” *Fellowship*, BPC; Naeve, “What Can We (I) Do,” 1-4. Naeve’s personal writings fluctuate with the actual number of boxes, anywhere between 150 to 250.

<sup>29</sup> Naeve, “What Can We (I) Do,” 1-4.

<sup>30</sup> Naeve, “How Did the Box Project Begin,” BPC.

**AD.** Mary and Lester Taylor  
Rt. 1 Box 86  
Itta Bena, Miss. 38941  
Missionary Baptist

Dec. 1965

AD: Fisher  
AD: Brooks  
\*Eppelsheimer  
Naeve (books)  
Friedman

food sent sheet →

Rt. 2 Box 96 2000 add - Greenwood, Miss. 38930

girls:  
12 Ophelia 13 yr. 8 yr. shoe 2 daughter of Max Ophelia Sample  
15 Kattie 14 yr. shoe 7

boys:  
14 John 12 John Lester 12 year shoe 4  
13 Walter 10 10 years old shoe 3  
9 Sylvester 6 yrs. shoe 12  
7 Eddie 4 year shoe 8  
Brent 4 year shoe 8

Mary.....dress 12 shoe 7 28 years old  
Lester pants 32 X 33 shirt 15 shoe 10

Needs shoes, caps, underwear.  
Ophelia & Sylvester need coats, we don't have these things at all.

Information as of July, 15th 1966  
Dress size 15 (Mary) shoe 7 age 39  
Lester pants 32x33 shoe 9 shirt 15

Ophelia 8 years shoe 2  
Kattie 15 shoe 7  
John L. 13 shoe 5  
Walter 11 shoe 3  
Sylvester 7 year shoe 1  
Brent 4 year shoe 8

Friedman

Brooks: 93 S. Main St. Waterbury, Vt.  
Fisher, 31 School St. Williamstown, Mass  
Eppelsheimer, Gossville, N.H.




Figure 1: Information card used by Virginia Naeve to help organize families that she helped. This card on the Taylor family of Itta Bena, Mississippi, was updated for a few years by hand. Image courtesy of Box Project Collection, Delta State University.

During the formative years of Box Project, Clarie Collins Harvey, the Jackson, Mississippi, activist and funeral home owner who Naeve had met on the trip to Geneva, was instrumental in its growth. Harvey was a respected member of the black middle-class with connections throughout Mississippi. As the founder of Womanpower Unlimited, Harvey united women across racial lines to engage in movement dialogue, conduct voter registration campaigns specifically targeting women, and hold clothing drives for children integrating schools and college students imprisoned during freedom rides.<sup>31</sup> Naeve had made just the right contact to ensure the spread of the Box Project throughout Mississippi. Soon after Naeve and Harvey returned from Geneva in 1963, Harvey purchased a subscription to the *FREEDOM PRESS*, a black Mississippi newspaper, for Naeve as a gift. The paper gave Naeve an immediate account of

<sup>31</sup> John Dittmer, *Local People: The Struggle for Civil Rights in Mississippi* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1994), 98; Morris, "Clarie Collins Harvey," 283.



the poverty and injustice occurring in Mississippi but also provided her with additional contacts for blacks in Mississippi that her budding organization could help.<sup>32</sup> The following year, Naeve made a trip to Mississippi to visit Harvey and witness the situation in the South with her own eyes. According to Harvey, at one point during the trip, Naeve was forced to ride “slumped down in the back seat of a car” when transported through more treacherous parts of the state.<sup>33</sup>

Naeve recounted the experience in an unpublished manuscript on the history of the Box Project:

In April 1964 I went to Mississippi and visited as many people as I could and went to the areas that were safe to move freely. I met people we had been working with for many months or years and had not previously met. It was a wonderful experience and with Clarie, we visited an area she had never been in and spent the day with the families we had helped.<sup>34</sup>

On some level, Naeve’s relationship with Harvey was what she hoped to replicate throughout the country – unfiltered, person-to-person relationships between black women in the South and white women in the North. Although entire families were engaged in and benefitting from the exchange of goods and information, the primary persons who compiled boxes and penned letters were women. Most of women engaged in the Project would never actually meet, yet the relationships fostered through the letters were sufficient enough for women of drastically different backgrounds, in the midst of a dangerous and threatening struggle, to gain understanding of one another’s experience with the possibility of friendship.

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<sup>32</sup> Naeve, “How Did the Box Project Begin,” BPC; Naeve, “The Mississippi Box Project,” *Fellowship*, BPC.

<sup>33</sup> Clarie Collins Harvey, “Women as Social Activists in Church Based Movements,” copy of report given at the King Center October 12-15, 1988, Atlanta, GA, BPC.

<sup>34</sup> Virginia Naeve, “Unpublished Manuscript,” n.d., BPC, 3.

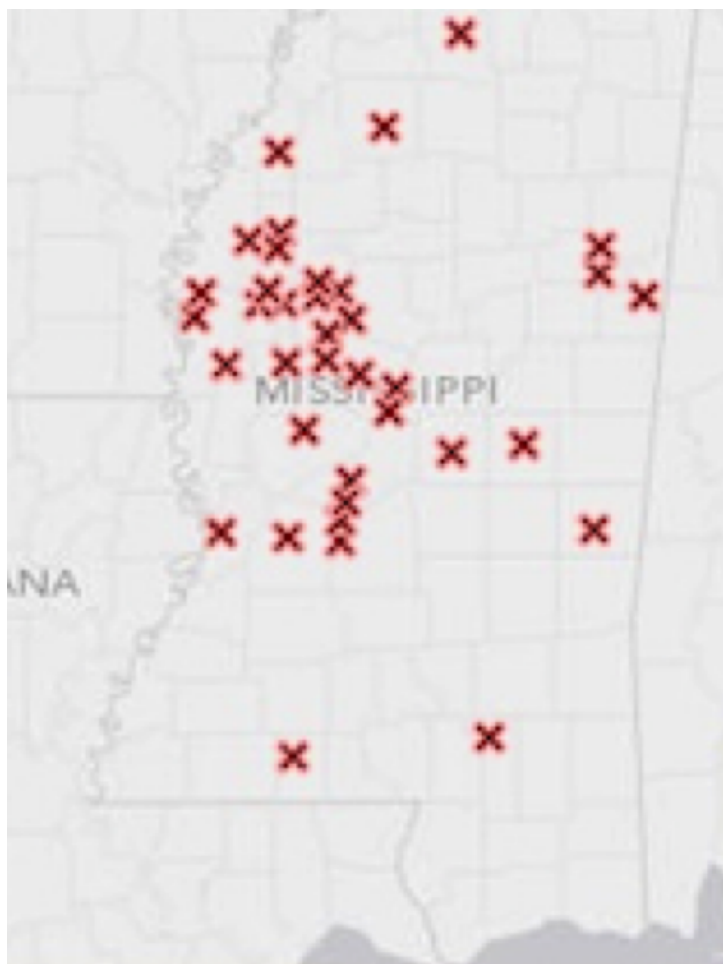


Figure 2: Locations of boxes donated in 1964 to Mississippi. The majority of boxes were shipped to the Delta Region. Graphic created by the author, 2014, using [worldmap.harvard.edu/maps](http://worldmap.harvard.edu/maps).

The Project, originating in New England, grew, eventually making its way to the Midwest and West Coast. While Naeve's friends in the pacifist community had a hand in getting the word out about the project, Naeve was not limited to just one circle of influence. A Glendale, California, woman wrote to Naeve that she shared information about the Box Project on her church's bulletin board in an "effort to enlist more helpers for the Southern families."<sup>35</sup> It is worth noting that Naeve, a self-identified "non-believer," had no qualms about using the evangelical Christian community to effect change, writing a 1966 letter that she would "work

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<sup>35</sup> Helen Smiley to Virginia Naeve, June 23, 1967, BPC.

with any institution that is helping people.”<sup>36</sup> The letters swarmed in. People from all over the country wanted to know how they, too, could “adopt” an impoverished (black) family. Naeve’s time was consumed with responding to the correspondence. By 1967, Naeve’s hard work had borne fruit. Just four years after the first boxes went south, the Project had swelled to over 306 helpers throughout the United States and Canada, providing aid in the form of money, food, clothing, and scholarships to over 1500 southerners.<sup>37</sup> In an effort to streamline the communication of the organization, Naeve began sending out twelve to fifteen newsletters per year to donors, providing updates, instructions for sending packages, suggested items for families, and excerpts from the compelling letters sent north.<sup>38</sup>

By organizing women from coast to coast in the North and South, Naeve had established conciliatory lines of communication between women of the embattled Delta and outside help. The network was complete. This amiable exchange of aid in the form of goods and unfiltered dialogue from the frontlines of the Southern Movement served, for many women involved, as the first positive interaction with a person of another race. Under the guise of charitable donations

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<sup>36</sup> Virginia Naeve to Mary Taylor, August 1, 1966, BPC.

<sup>37</sup> Virginia Naeve, “Unpublished Manuscript,” n.d., 142, BPC. Naeve’s manuscript is a collection of letters from the Taylor family and some of their donor of over the years, including some of Naeve’s original letters (when she began making carbon copies). They are more letters from the Taylors that Naeve because Naeve was archiving the letters as they came in. It was not until later that she thinks to make copies and request letters from some of the Taylor’s other donors. Naeve, “What Can We (I) Do,” 1-4. It took two to four northern families to meet the needs of one black southern family.

The central focus of the project was to help southern families; however, Naeve sometimes used the funds and support garnered through the project to help Civil Rights activists in efforts that she called “scholarships.” Sam Block, SNCC worker in Mississippi, received funds from the Box Project for college and Alice Blackwell was a civil organizer in the Delta that the Box Project helped financially who also connected Naeve with black families to help.

<sup>38</sup> “FAMILY-TO-FAMILY PACKAGE PROJECT NEWSLETTER” Jan 15, 1967.

and interstate communiqués, firmly held racial blockades began to crumble. Moreover, because the thoughts and experiences of these women were written down, in their own hand, with such candor, their voices have been preserved in rare and unique fashion.

### **Voices from the South**

I have never seen so much trouble in my life.

– Mary Taylor, 1965<sup>39</sup>

We jest want to have freedom so badly we jest could almost see it.

– Beauty Campbell, 1965<sup>40</sup>

Much of what has been written about the lives of rural Mississippi women has been limited to two pivotal figures: Anne Moody, CORE student activist from Centreville, Mississippi, and Fannie Lou Hamer, Ruleville, Mississippi native, Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee (SNCC) field secretary and co-founder of the Mississippi Freedom Democratic Party. Moody and Hamer are leading examples of the varying degrees to which women made salient contributions to the Movement. They also share backgrounds with many of the rural black women discussed in this paper as products of large sharecropping families and witnesses to the injustices of Mississippi's society under Jim Crow. Moody and Hamer do, however, differ fundamentally from most women of the Box Project in one important way: during their most active years of the movement, Moody and Hamer were not mothers of small children. Perhaps it was the freedom from small children that gave them the mobility necessary for active roles in organizations such as SNCC, CORE, MFDP. In Moody's autobiography, she writes with frustration of her family's seemingly complacent attitude regarding injustice and her

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<sup>39</sup> Mary Taylor to Virginia Naeve, June 21, 1965, BPC.

<sup>40</sup> Beauty Campbell to Virginia Naeve, April 28, 1965, BPC.

mother's propensity to "always [choose] the wrong time to have babies." The eldest of nine but free from the responsibilities of motherhood, Moody was able to take on an active role in the student movement and had the mobility to seek refuge in New Orleans when times in Mississippi became too dangerous. Hamer and her husband, Perry, did not have biological children, but adopted an infant and a nine-year-old in 1954, eight years before Hamer became engaged in the Movement. After attempting to register to vote for the first time in 1962 at the age of forty-four, Hamer became actively involved with SNCC. Her entry into Movement later life along with the association and support of well-known organizations may have been determinant factors that made Hamer's mobility and visibility during the Civil Rights Era possible.<sup>41</sup>

Anne Moody and Fannie Lou Hamer challenge the patriarchal tradition of male leadership in the Civil Rights Movement as visible organizers, out-right leaders, and self-proclaimed activists. They stand out but do not stand alone as there were other women, often associated with established civil rights organizations, who served as field secretaries and project organizers. Hamer and Moody's experiences in the Movement are not, however, representative of the experiences of the vast majority of rural black women of Mississippi. While Hamer's and Moody's affiliation with notable organizations offered a distinctive platform for their voices to

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<sup>41</sup> Anne Moody, *Coming of Age in Mississippi* (New York: Bantam Dell, 1968), 118; Chana Kai Lee, *For Freedom's Sake: The Life of Fannie Lou Hamer* (Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 1999), x- xii, 21; Kay Mills, *This Little Light of Mine: The Life of Fannie Lou Hamer* (Lexington: The University of Kentucky Press, 2007). Fannie Lou Hamer was involuntary sterilized in 1961 by a local Mississippi doctor. Involuntary sterilizations were not an uncommon "accident" to happen to black women in the south. By the time she entered the movement by attempting to register to vote, Hamer was forty-four years old. To be clear, I am not making light of Hamer's mothering responsibilities because she entered the movement later in life. Certainly she had a unique experience as the mother of an eight-year-old and fifteen-year-old when she became active in the movement in 1962; however, it is important to note that Hamer's two children were older when she became active, and she had the support of established Civil Rights organizations.

be heard, hence, saving them from historical anonymity, the countless voices of disenfranchised, disassociated, rural blacks have been silence for the last half century, especially women and mothers. The lack of accounts has led to the narrow belief that rural African Americans were apathetic about the Freedom Struggle or so paralyzed with fear that they refused to participate in any way. Freedom Summer workers considered it their job to “shake loose the fear” that plagued “rural southern blacks from wholeheartedly organizing and acting on their own behalf.” Moody recalled canvassing in the Delta as local blacks desiring “no part of voting” slammed doors in her face. Moody wrote, “Many Negroes were afraid to come” out and “had been brain-wash[ed] so by the whites, they really thought that only whites were supposed to vote.” According to Moody, some had “never even heard of voting” and “the only thing most of them [knew] how to handle was a hoe.”<sup>42</sup>

Moreover, motherhood has been attributed to furthering the idea of apathy among rural women. Historian Jacqueline Jones wrote that some southern “mothers worn from care of too many children appeared too distracted to even contemplate a better way of life.” Adding to this notion, Moody wrote in her autobiography with annoyance of her mother’s years of childbearing and appeared to have linked her mother’s fertility to the family’s poverty, apathy, and even disdain for the Movement.<sup>43</sup> To be clear, fear of incurring violence or worse on oneself or family was certainly a factor in the lack of public involvement in the movement of many rural African Americans, and motherhood or maternal responsibilities made participation a much more complicated issue. But these accounts perpetuate a narrow perception of rural blacks and do not

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<sup>42</sup> Elizabeth Sutherland Martinez, *Letters from Mississippi: Personal Reports from civil right volunteers of the 1964 Freedom Summer* (Brookline, MA: Zephyr Press, 2002), iv, viii; Moody, *Coming of Age in Mississippi*, 275-276.

<sup>43</sup> Jacqueline Jones, *Labor of Love, Labor of Sorrow: Black Women, Work, and the Family from Slavery to the Present* (New York: Basic Books, 2010), 242.

give them credit for understanding and concerning themselves with Movement ideals. Furthermore, the constraints that kept many rural black women from participating in public protest, therefore visibly challenging the racial status quo, have often been dismissed as their lack of understanding or concern for the Movement on the part of Southern women. The obligations of women to their families may have kept them from public participation, but the Box Project and their participation in the Project contradicts the idea that black women in Mississippi were not knowledgeable and concerned about the movement. To gain a broader knowledge of the complexities of rural black women's experiences of the Civil Rights Movement, blanket statements regarding *apathy* and *fear* should be reassessed and the Movement should be analyzed from the perspective of the women who have been spoken about but rarely heard from.

The ability and mobility of public participation afforded to notable figures such as Moody and Hamer through established civil rights organizations was not an option for many, if not most, rural African American women. Though they were not on what historians have seen as the frontlines of the Civil Rights Movement, it could be said that they *lived* on the front lines and each letter they wrote to the North advocated for the entirety of the movement, especially the more private and mundane struggles. Furthermore, the daily struggles of rural blacks were intrinsically linked to their level of participation. Poor blacks in the Delta were less likely to exercise their voting rights, attend mass meetings, or publically protest through marches if it left the stability of their homes and providing for their families in jeopardy. As many civil rights organizations knew, "subsistence [was] tied to the vote," yet, this did not keep them from labeling poor rural blacks as unaware or apathetic.<sup>44</sup>

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<sup>44</sup> Quincy Mills, "SNCC Food for Freedom," Association for Study of African American Life and History (ASALH) conference, Memphis, Tennessee, September 27, 2014. "Subsistence

However, the clandestine movement of letters and goods emerging from the domestic sphere is a powerful example of the variety of strategies employed during the Movement in which rural blacks could participate. Letters from women in the South revealed their intimacy to the movement and the reality that freedom for them was synonymous with daily survival. The letters reveal a choice made to participate in an alternative to open combat – a covert strategy of information exchange with practical solutions that pushed the movement forward from their homes, into their communities, and ultimately to the public arena. The letters were their chance to move, to march, and to express to those beyond Mississippi, even in the subtlest of ways, their hardships.<sup>45</sup> As time progressed and the exchange continued, they took steps in their daily lives to advance the Movement and improve the quality of life for their families and themselves. Even so, concealed and mundane as they were, rarely did these actions go unnoticed by the racist white power structure. And often, they came with a price.

Nothing conveys this message more than a January 20, 1965, letter written by Mary Taylor to Virginia Naeve. In this letter, one of the first in a nearly decade-long series of correspondence

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is tied to the vote” is a direct from Mill’s presentation on a chapter from a forthcoming book, tentatively titled *The Wages of Resistance: Financing the Black Freedom Movement*.

<sup>45</sup> Robin D.G. Kelly, *Race Rebels: Culture, Politics, and the Black Working Class*, (New York: The Free Press, 1996), 8, 89-90. My thinking on the clandestine nature of rural black women’s participation in the Civil Rights movement has been influenced by historian Robin Kelley’s interpretation of anthropologist James C. Scott’s work on “hidden transcripts.” Kelley writes that the “veiled social and cultural worlds of oppressed people frequently surface in daily forms of resistance...Together the ‘hidden transcripts’ created in aggrieved communities and expressed through cultural, and the daily acts of resistance and survival, constitute what Scott calls ‘infrapolitics.’” Kelley argues that we cannot understand the political history of oppressed peoples “without reference to infrapolitics” and the hidden transcript. Like Kelly, who explored the hidden transcript of black resistance to segregation on public transportation, this paper considers the concept of hidden transcripts to understand the clandestine movement of letters and goods between black and white women as a form of resistance to the racist white power structure of the South. The Box Project, under the guise of charitable donations, exposes the individual and everyday resistance of black women and mothers and how their acts influenced the outside perception of the Civil Rights struggle.



between the two, Mary painted a vivid picture of her family's living conditions since attempting to vote the year before and how illness further indebted them to the plantation owner on whose property they lived and worked. "Last year when I was very sick, my employer would not loan me any money to go to the hospital." Mary's family, including her husband, Lester, and mother, Ophelia, labored tirelessly to pay the debt. Now, however, after attempting to register to vote, Lester had trouble finding work. Hands tied and struggling to buy food for the family, Mary and Lester accepted a hundred-dollar "loan" from the boss man. Mary's tone, while conveying to the New England activist her story of cyclical forced dependency, was never that of seeking pity but rather seeking understanding from a trusted confidant. Naeve, no stranger to financial uncertainty, could empathize. Thus, Mary's words served as bridges to the outside world – a world outside of the South and outside of the racial walls she had been forced to live within. At the same time, Mary's letters not only brought attention to her hardship, but also sought to bring awareness to the dire situation of her entire community. "Thir are plenty people hear are just like us," Mary assured the reader, "thir children going to school without anything to eat al day and some ar not able to go at al." In the four page letter, Mary went on to stress that the lack of jobs, food, and stable housing made life in the Delta unbearable at times, emphasizing near the end of the letter that "it is unbelievable the way we have live."<sup>46</sup>

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<sup>46</sup> Mary Taylor to "Friends" (Most likely Naeve), Jan 20 1965, BPC.

Aussan

April 28, 1965  
Route 5 Box 579  
Holly Spring Miss

Virginia Naeve

I am writing her for help  
please if you can it will be  
thank for it I am writing her for  
~~shoes~~ shoes and clothes Dress size  
7 and Dress size 12 Dress size  
15 and shoes size 8 in a half and  
shoes 6 in a half shoes size 7 1/2  
you can do this we will thank you  
for them and if you can't we will thank  
you just the same Because we are for  
freedom slips and pants and gains  
I would do this But the lady in Jack  
son told me to do this she told me  
she would send the letter I written her  
the she would send that one to  
you nothing in the family But one lady  
she is 46 years age and to girls  
Jurline 13 years age Bertha is  
15 years of age Beauty B the lady is  
46 years age and we just want to  
have freedom so badly we just can't  
almost see it And Freedom School  
Must come we need it to look on the  
other side

Figure 3: Beauty Campbell's April 1965 letter to Virginia Naeve. Box Project Staff (Virginia Naeve or Myrtle Lane) underlined items in the letter to highlight economic, educational, and racial disparities. Image courtesy of BPC, Delta State University.

Other Mississippi women writing North shared similar sentiments. Itta Bena resident Besola Anderson's response to her Vermont "box lady" spoke to the overwhelming lack of basic household items, needs that were not met until she connected with the Box Project: "You know I am a mother of 12 children and I also recive a box I found forks, spoons, and foods also don't you realize how happy I was about that I only has one spoon in the house and two forks, and I want to tell you thank you, thank you, thank you, very much for what you doing to make my family and me very happy to become a family."<sup>47</sup> Such unfathomable accounts regarding the scarcity of basic household needs, like family of fourteen existing with only three utensils, were certainly shocking to northern readers, who were often mothers. Fannie Lue Neal of Cruger, Mississippi, received a "nice kitchen set" and a "nice bedspread" from donors in July 1968. She later requested soap and "two rubber sheet" because two of her three young children "wet in the bed sometime."<sup>48</sup> Stable housing was the issue that plagued Sidon, Mississippi, woman Mimi Lipsey. After falling behind on rent, Mimi's family was evicted. The eviction literally tore the family apart and spread them all over the Delta. "My children in one place, I'm in another, and my husband in another," Mimi wrote. Mimi was the mother of six children, including a daughter born just days before the eviction.<sup>49</sup> The situation in Mississippi was desperate for these women. They faced sudden family separation and often lived without the very essentials needed for daily survival. The items that these women requested – soap, sheets, comforters, cookware, and

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<sup>47</sup> Besola Anderson to Myrtle Lane, June 18 and 19, 1967, BPC. "Box lady" is a term that has been used by some of the southern women in describing their northern helpers.

<sup>48</sup> Fannie Lue Neal to Virginia Naeve, July 27, 1968, BPC.

<sup>49</sup> Mimi Lipsey to Myrtle Lane, June 2, 1966, BPC.

utensils – luxuries by no means, speak to the material circumstances on the ground and in the homes of local rural black during the height of the Civil Rights Movement – a situation with an immense impact on the level to which they could participate.

Acquiring health essentials was a daunting task as well. In 1966, Jessie Ward of Sidon thanked Naeve for sending her five dollars, writing that she was “trying to save it and the 5.00 Mrs. Helmuth send” to put a down payment on a pair of thirty-five dollar glasses. This would be difficult for Jessie as she lacked the remaining five dollars for down payment and had recently been notified that her food stamps were decreasing from sixty-six dollars to sixteen.<sup>50</sup> Like Mary, Jessie would be forced to make sacrifices in order to provide for her family, to the detriment of her own health. In many cases, the children had special health needs. Jessie’s son required special shoes because he had twelve toes, Mary’s son had muscular dystrophy, and Alice Rogers, of Winterville, Mississippi, had a child with a heart murmur.<sup>51</sup> In one of her earlier letters, Mary introduced the reader in great detail to her son’s poor health condition: “My baby is very sick and the doctor say thir is no ceare [cure] for him he has been sickly al of his life. he is limber he cant use his body but he can use his hand to eat or hold light things.”<sup>52</sup> Money coming to these women through the Box Project was spent on doctor’s appointments, hospital visits, and special medication for the family. If any money was left over from the relatively small but significant amounts received from northern donors, it could be used for groceries and day-to-day family necessities.

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<sup>50</sup> Jessie Ward to Virginia Naeve, October 31, 1967, BPC.

<sup>51</sup> Jessie Ward Family Questionnaire, BPC; Mary Taylor letter on March 7, 1966 (Naeve Manuscript), BPC; Alice Rogers, Family Questionnaire, n.d., BPC.

<sup>52</sup> Mary Taylor to Virginia Naeve, January 20, 1965, BPC.



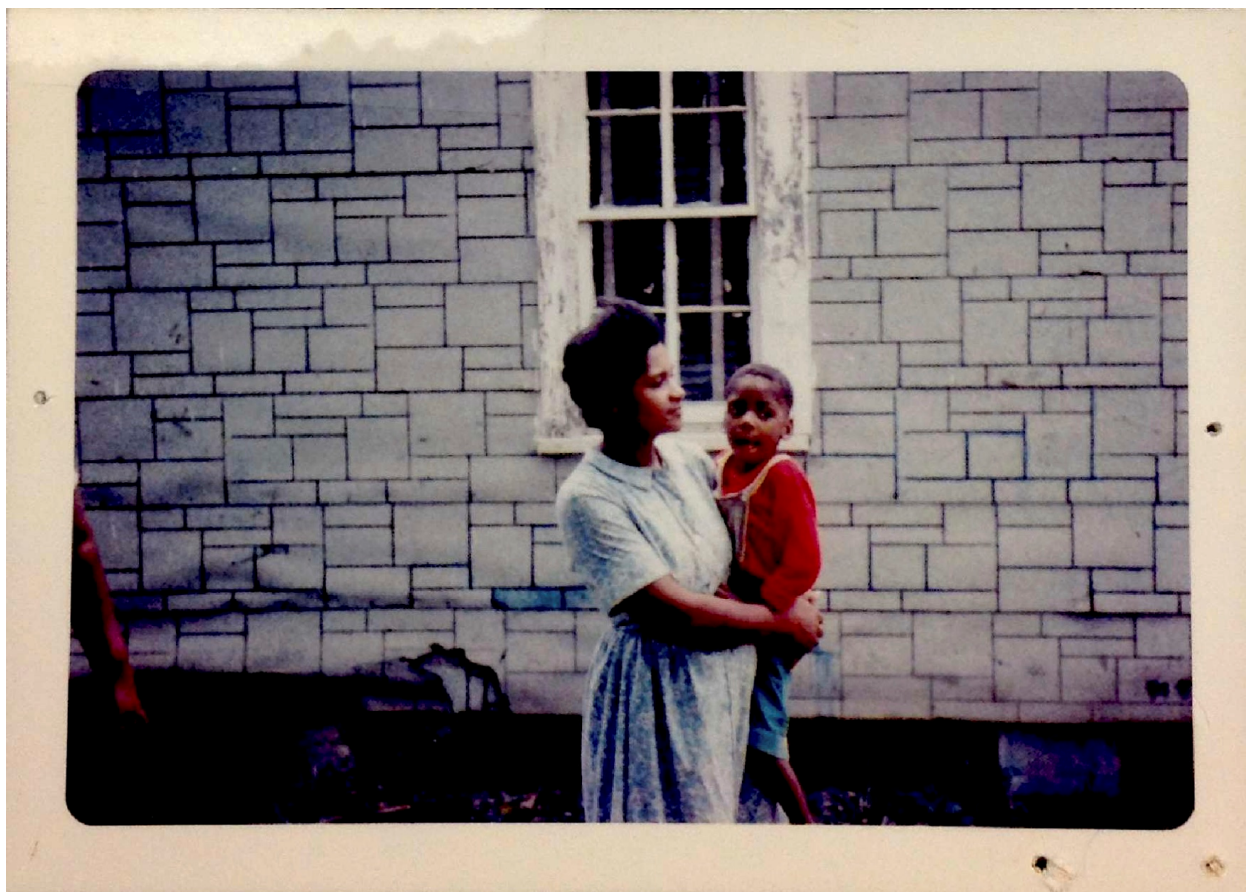


Figure 4: Mary Taylor and son, Brant (or Brent), outside of their home in Mississippi (December 1966). Image courtesy of Box Project Collection, Delta State University.

In the lives of these women, with illness pervasive and job security nonexistent, rarely did a season pass without tragedy and unforeseen death. The letters of Mary Taylor and her mother, Ophelia Sample, describe a period between 1965 and 1966 where sudden death cast its shadow of sorrow over the entire family. Ophelia wrote to Naeve apologizing for not writing “because of so many death in my family.” She explained, “First it was my Mother and Father and then my favorite sister in law. And my cousin who was buried yesterday. It has been a lot of worry on me.”<sup>53</sup> Times like these were hard on everyone. In January of 1965, Mary wrote of the death and funeral of her brother-in-law: “He fell dead at home with a hart attack. That frunal

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<sup>53</sup> Ophelia Sample on March 4, 1966, BPC.

was so sad. His wife cried so much I though she would be nex.”<sup>54</sup> That same year, Mary’s son John witnessed the death of his math teacher in the classroom: “[H]e was a good man the children hellowed [hollered] and cried so loud that how they found him they was trying to go an tell anyone that he had fell but they noed he was dieing.”<sup>55</sup> In other cases, death came in the form of unsolved murder. In 1965, an Itta Bena man was “beat to death” and according to Mary “no one no who did it.” “I no you no about some of the thing are going on here,” Mary alerted the reader, “it is more people getting kild here that ever before.”<sup>56</sup>

Accidental, unexpected, and sudden death shook up entire families, especially when it removed the male breadwinner from the home. Just across the state border in Rossville, Tennessee, Nora Lewis, mother of seven, wrote of her husband being killed when his tractor tipped over while pulling two Civil Rights workers from a ditch: “My husband died Sept. 1. He helped me get [my children] in all white school before he pass. I haven’t gotten over it yet because my children is very expency in school. Sometimes I don’t have money to give them for lunches sometimes they goes to school without lunch money... My husband was a great civil right worker in the field... [he] planned to get more in [the school] but the accident happen to him.”<sup>57</sup> Not only was Nora’s husband the financial provider, he led their family and others in the struggle for equality. In his absence, Nora picked cotton and drove the tractor during harvest time for her family’s stability.

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<sup>54</sup> Mary Taylor to Virginia Naeve January 20, 1965, BPC.

<sup>55</sup> Mary Taylor to Virginia Naeve, undated 1965, BPC. Mary never states how exactly John’s teacher died, but it appears that he died from a sudden medical condition, perhaps a heart attach or a stroke.

<sup>56</sup> Mary Taylor to Virginia Naeve, June 21, 1965, BPC.

<sup>57</sup> Naeve Manuscript, 5, BPC, Nora Lewis to Virginia Naeve, Oct. 7, 1967, BPC.

Nora's letters illustrate two common features in the experiences of rural black women. The first is that nearly every aspect of the lives of these women was intertwined with the Movement struggles. For Nora, it was rewarding that her children were able to attend an all-white school, but financial hardship forced her to send them there without lunch money. Abject poverty could limit the success of Movement victories across the board. Second, Nora quickly assumed the role of sole provider for her family after her husband's death. She drove the tractor, picked cotton, *and* acquired food from her Box Project donor as a means of subsistence. Though all families did not experience tragedy as the result of helping civil rights workers, women were often left heads of households because of the sudden deaths of their husbands – deaths that perhaps could have been prevented if southern hospitals were not segregated.

Often overcome with misfortune and sadness, in the midst of death, poverty, and joblessness, rural black women clung to their faith, looking to prayer to as their only option for change. When tragedy struck, southern women would take to pencil and paper to inform their northern acquaintances, frequently closing with appeals to join “with us in praying for peace,” “pray for me and my kids,” and to please “keep on helping the poor and need[y]” with God's blessing.<sup>58</sup>

Mary's letters often depict life in the Delta as a war zone. In December of 1965, Mary asked Naeve to “pray for God will be done and tha the war will stop and that peace will come in our land.”<sup>59</sup> While in this instance, Mary was referring to Mississippi and not Vietnam, she considered the root of both wars to be the same: “I believe if people would stop and pray more

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<sup>58</sup> Mary Taylor to Virginia Naeve June 21, 1965, BPC; Besola Anderson to Myrtle Lane, October 1967, BPC; Ophelia Sample to Virginia Naeve, November 4, 1964, BPC.

<sup>59</sup> Mary to Naeve, December 3, 1965, BPC;

thing would change...it is sin that cause the war in Vietnam and in our homeland. It is no need to kill. My Bible teaches me against killing. I pray that we can lean to love more.”<sup>60</sup> To Mary, the injustice, murder, and poverty faced by her community were directly linked to sin. The religious beliefs of Mary and other rural women served as centers of solace in a senseless world, making life slightly more bearable.<sup>61</sup>

The essential role of prayer in the lives of southern blacks was indicative of the religious tradition of the black church and each letter asking for prayer communicated that. However, the letters also communicated something else. They served as communiqués on the circumstances of the Delta to the outside world. While white Mississippians censored the messages presented to local and national media outlets, the letters circumvented that control. Often, the letters sent North advocated for an awareness of the injustices and extreme poverty facing the South. In the case of Mary Taylor, her letters broadcast the unfortunate circumstances of African Americans in her home county of Leflore, most of whom worked as domestics and field-laborers with less than a fifth-grade education. When Mary asked Virginia “Do you know how things are down here?” she was speaking for the black population that made up two-thirds of the 47,000 residents of the county but whose median income in 1960 was \$1400 – about one-fourth the income of their

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<sup>60</sup> Mary Taylor to Virginia Naeve January 20, 1965, BPC.

<sup>61</sup>Evelyn Brooks Higginbotham’s work *Righteous Discontent* is helpful in understanding black women’s work in the church as a means to racial uplift and racial self-help. Though Higginbotham focuses on the late nineteenth – early twentieth century and middle class black women, the essential role of the church is still evident in the lives of the rural black women discussed in this paper. As Higginbotham asserts, the church was “the only space truly accessible to the black community,” and interestingly, still an avenue for women to work together across the color line.



white counterparts.<sup>62</sup> The economic and educational disparities of Leflore County were representative of similar trends occurring in Washington County, Sunflower County, Humphries County, and neighboring Mississippi counties. Other letters relate starvation wages of “only getting 35 cent and hour,” a “church [that] got burn down in lefloria country,” and the “danger to go any where at night.”<sup>63</sup> The compelling letters broke through white-controlled media outlets to call for recognition of the trials under Jim Crow, and encouraged a sense of activism and urgency among the northern readers of letters.

The Box Project offers a parallel opportunity to examine white female participation. The northern recipients of letters from Mary and her fellow Mississippians were often mothers themselves, and like their Mississippi counterparts, faced significant constraints that kept them from actively engaging in the Southern struggle for equality. Naeve, mother and founder of the Box Project organization, wrote of the dangers of traveling South in 1965 as a white woman. In May of that year, Naeve had the opportunity to visit black friends and correspondents in Mississippi and made the conscious decision to avoid an area of the state she deemed most dangerous. Naeve wrote: “I could not go to the Delta... Bus travel was a risky business at that time for a white woman visiting only black families...My family at home was apprehensive of my making the southern excursion at all. Mrs. [Liuzzo] had been killed in Alabama; Goodman, Chaney, and Schwerner, in Philadelphia, Miss.; and [Jonathan] Daniels in Ala. All these things

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<sup>62</sup> Mary Taylor to Virginia Naeve, Dec. 12 1965, BPC; Charles Payne, *I've Got the Light of Freedom: The Organizing Tradition and the Mississippi Freedom* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1995) 133-135.

<sup>63</sup>Savannah Hudson to Virginia Naeve, February 1, 1965, BPC; Earnestine Peoples to Myrtle Lane, undated, BPC; Mary Taylor to Virginia Naeve, June 21, 1965, BPC.

were in all our minds.”<sup>64</sup> Naeve specifically cited Viola Liuzzo, slain Selma marcher from Michigan and mother of five, as the reason she only visited areas in Mississippi where she could “move freely” – the Delta was not one of them.

Naeve knew of the backlash that could come upon white mothers who sacrificed their maternal duties to engage in the southern freedom struggle. Liuzzo was criticized posthumously for participating in the Selma March, an act that led to her death at the hands of Klansmen in 1965. Many reactions to her death were not sympathetic. Mary Stanton, Liuzzo’s biographer and a teenager at the time of the event, describes reactions in her home as “heated.” Stanton’s family wondered: “What was she doing down there, a woman like that, old enough to know better? Why would a woman with five children go to Selma? Was she crazy? Where was her husband? Couldn’t he stop her?”<sup>65</sup> In July of 1965, just four months after the murder, *Ladies Home Journal* commissioned a national survey to its readers asking women, “No matter what your opinions are on the question of voting rights, do you think that Mrs. Viola Liuzzo, Detroit Civil Rights worker who was killed in an Alabama shooting incident, had the right to leave her five children to risk her life for a social cause or not?” Fifty-five percent of respondents did not believe Liuzzo had “a right to leave her children” for a “social cause.”<sup>66</sup> Twenty-six percent thought it was within her rights to join the southern movement, and the remaining 19 percent had

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<sup>64</sup> Virginia Naeve, “Unpublished Manuscript,” n.d., BPC, 3, 26.

<sup>65</sup> Mary Stanton, *From Selma to Sorrow: The Life and Death of Viola Liuzzo* (Athens: University of Georgia Press, 1998), 6.

<sup>66</sup> The *Ladies Home Journal*, July 1965, 42, 44. Stanton, *From Selma to Sorrow*, 171.

no opinion on the matter. The court of public opinion had weighted in. Viola should have been home in Michigan, taking care of her children.<sup>67</sup>

Liuzzo's martyrdom stood as a profound example of the dangers of active participation and as a cautionary tale of the place of white mothers in the Civil Rights Movement – that place being no where near the combative South. Thus, the Box Project provided an alternative avenue of participation for the nearly 300 northern helpers, most of whom never made a trip to Mississippi during the height of the Civil Right Movement but chose instead to act from the safe confines of their homes. In one instance, however, Ruth Hooke, a helper from Maine, passed through Greenwood, Mississippi, in 1967 with her family and made sure to visit her “adopted” family [figure 6]. Though they only spent one hour with Maggie Pearl Montgomery's family at their “house in the middle of a cotton field,” they were sure to snap photos to send to Naeve. Hooke dropped off a few toys for the children and gave Maggie Pearl twenty-five dollars but made sure to leave before lunch because Hooke “didn't want to embarrass [Maggie Pearl] about having nothing to offer us.”<sup>68</sup> Although most northern women of the Box Project chose to stay out of the South, they found a way to actively participate in the movement by supplying money and food in an effort to alleviate southern poverty, by circulating political information under veil of charitable donations, and by lending encouragement to their southern counterparts. In response to the illicit support of northern whites, moving letters with stories of church bombings, unsolved murders of black men and women, and other injustices that revealed the depth of the

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<sup>67</sup> Stanton, *From Selma to Sorrow*, 6, 133-141, 171.

<sup>68</sup> Ruth A. Hooke to Virginia Naeve, July 21, 1976, BPC.

Southern crisis made their way North. The letters led to a flood of “outside” packages going black families in Mississippi Delta.<sup>69</sup>

The goods that came into the homes of rural black women allowed them to enrich their communities in ways that may not have been possible otherwise. In her letters, Mary expressed an understanding that her role in the community was to assist those with greater needs. When her family received a box in January of 1965 filled with coats from a Mrs. Freadman, a Vermont resident, Mary decided that rather than giving them to her own children, she would share them with Jack and Albert Howard, two of her neighbor’s children. Mary wrote, “They didn’t have no coats...I could have used thim but they need them worster.” When Angeline Pilcher’s home in Sidon, Mississippi, burned down in the “dead winter time” of 1967, she recalled the kindness of her neighbors who shared their clothes with the family of eight. Alice Rogers shared two coats from her box with a family in her town, stating, “[The box] was a great help to me and others.” These women chose to share resources that were designated for their families when they knew of others with greater needs.<sup>70</sup>

Using the agency garnered through the Box Project to uplift their communities, Southern women were able acquire more than just clothing. Mary specifically requested food for her family from her Northern donor, sometimes by brand name. For her youngest child Brant, who was stricken with incurable illness that left him weak, with limited mobility, and a poor appetite, Mary asked that her box lady “send some instance brafast” “made by Carnation.” She added, “[T]he mose we can get [Brant] to eat is milk,” but he “eat that good.” The flavored milk

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<sup>69</sup> Virginia Naeve,” Unpublished Manuscript,” n.d., BPC, 3, 26.

<sup>70</sup> Mary Taylor to Virginia Naeve January 20, 1965, BPC; Angeline Pilcher to Virginia Naeve, December 18, 1967, BPC; Alice Rogers to September 17, 1965, BPC.

alternative added a small but significant variation to his diet, an addition that would not have been possible otherwise because of its high cost in the Delta.<sup>71</sup>

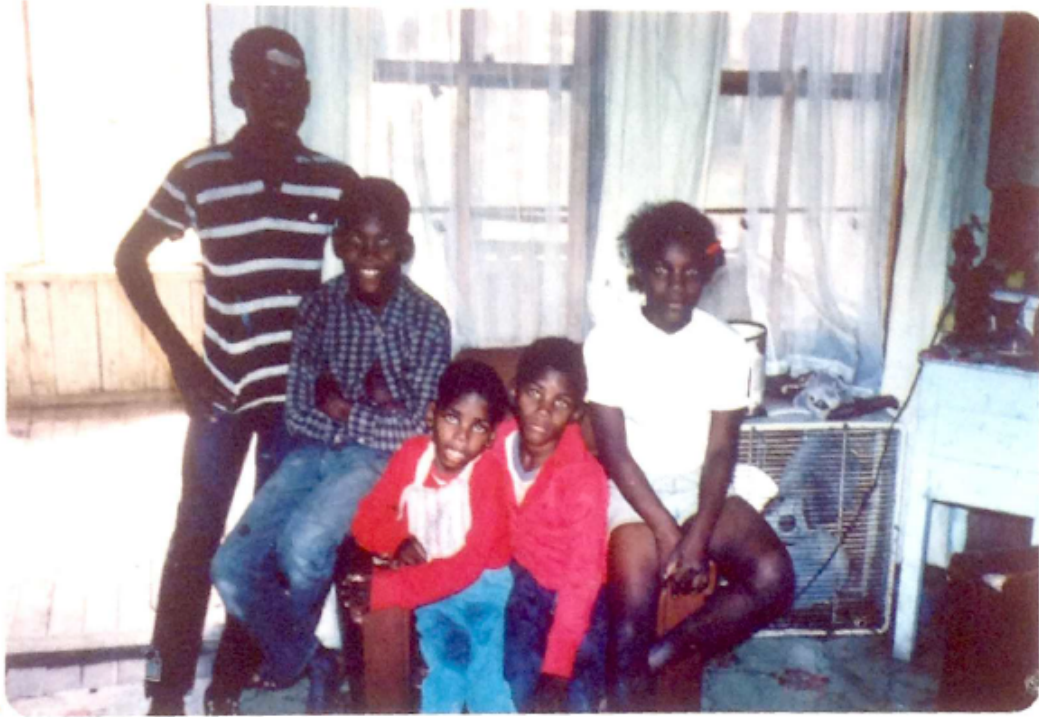


Figure 5: Taylor Children, John, Walter, Sylvester, Brent, Kattie (or Ophelia), at their home in Mississippi in December of 1966. Courtesy of the Box Project Collection, Delta State University.

Acquiring educational materials for her children and their friends also became a priority for Mary. In June 1965, Mary wrote Naeve on behalf of her older children John, Kattie, and Walter, “Please send the books,” adding that the children will share them with friends and take “good care of them.” Mary, desiring more for her children and the children of the community, advocated for their needs and when possible, distributed resources to those in need.<sup>72</sup>

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<sup>71</sup> Virginia Naeve, “Unpublished Manuscript,” n.d., BPC, 81-83; Mary Taylor to Virginia Naeve, January 20, 1965, BPC.

<sup>72</sup> Mary Taylor to “Friends” (Most likely Naeve), Jan 20, 1965, BPC; Mary Taylor to Mrs. Brooks, June 30, 1965, BPC.

The acquisition of books, educational materials, and school clothes shows that rural mothers were concerned with their children's academic success. Their maternal responsibilities and desperate circumstances did not keep rural women from pursuing a better way of life for their children. Without these letters, written in the voices of the women themselves, it is difficult to fully grasp the extent of their concern and sacrifice for the sake of their children. Women with school-aged children constantly requested "papers, pencils, back-pack," showing their understanding of the importance of education as a way out of generational poverty.<sup>73</sup> For Dora Ewing, just getting clothes for her son to wear to school was the battle: "Now thank to you all for the close that you sent me for him...that time I was not work and could not buy them and had to keep him out of school for he did not have clothes to wear."<sup>74</sup> As mentioned above, Nora Lewis took on the work of the farm in order to provide for her children and to ensure their success in school after her husband was killed.

At times, the profound desperation of these women poured out from their written words. Understanding that in many ways their opportunity for a proper education had passed, many women took on the dreams of their children. Besola Anderson, unable to finish high school she, wrote, "All my kids say they want to finish school so bad," adding, "I hope they can."<sup>75</sup> When responding to an item on the Box Project Family Questionnaire that asked if the family needed any "school help," a query concerned with the children's needs, Mary Taylor replied, "I wish I could go."<sup>76</sup> Dovie Hudson of Carthage, Mississippi, even sought to grant her children better

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<sup>73</sup> Jessie Ward, family questionnaire, BPC.

<sup>74</sup> Dora Ewing to Virginia Naeve, February 10, 1968, BPC.

<sup>75</sup> Besola Anderson to Myrtle Lane, October 7, 1967, BPC.

<sup>76</sup> Mary Taylor, family questionnaire, BPC.

educational options by having her children integrate the local school.<sup>77</sup> She was the mother of eleven. Mae Bertha Carter, Drew, Mississippi, mother of thirteen, desired to do the same. Carter's dream for her children: "to get them out of the cotton fields."<sup>78</sup> The embattled women dreamed of better lives for their children, absent from suffering, poverty, and want. The opportunities that these women fought for their children and slowly became available through legislative act could also mean separation. Opportunity often presented itself outside of their isolated, repressive communities, away from the women who first conceived the idea of a better life and sacrificed to make it happen.

While the motivation for rural black women's engagement in the Civil Rights Movement may have been centered on securing a better life for their progeny, their participation manifested in other ways, eventually breaking beyond the confines of the domestic sphere into the public arena. The exchange of goods and information, the concept upon which the Box Project hinged, needed a transporter: the United States Postal Service. However, in many areas of Mississippi, the postal workers, though federal employees, served as gatekeepers to Mississippi's closed society, and could prevent the flow of information coming to black Mississippians from outside of the state. This task became increasingly hard to manage due to the large influx of foreign goods making their way into the hands of local blacks through the Box Project. This reality came to a head for Mary on a routine trip to the Itta Bena Post Office.

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<sup>77</sup> Dovie Anderson, Box 3, Folder 7, BPC.

<sup>78</sup> Constance Curry, *Silver Rights: The story of the Carter family's brave decision to sent their children to an all-white school and claim their Civil Rights* (Harvest Books; San Diego, 1995). I do not know if Curry was a Box Project recipient. However, I include her here because she is an excellent example of a Delta mother's care for her children's future. The decision to send her children to an all-white school in Drew, Mississippi, in 1965 was certainly a public act of defiance that most rural black women were not able to make.

In late May of 1965, Mary arrived at the post office seeking a letter and maybe a package from her Massachusetts helper, Mrs. Fisher, but instead of receiving the items, Mary was accosted with a host of intrusive questions from the postmaster regarding her correspondence. Mary wrote of the experience in a letter to Mrs. Fisher that same month. According to Mary, the postmaster asked, “if i had any kind of people living in Williamstown, Mass.” The postmaster may have suspected packages from that region of the United States might contain freedom propaganda. Segregationist whites in Mississippi were on especially high alert due to the encroachment of Freedom Summer activists to the region just a year prior. Despite the hostility, Mary simply replied, “Yes I had some friends living thir” who sent letters and packages from time to time. Mary then explained that, “ She [the postmaster] said I send some mail back because she didnt thank I new anyone thir.” This instance of intimidation and invasion of privacy was nothing new to Southern blacks, but illustrates that even a United States postal employee could be complicit in the white supremacist environment of Mississippi.<sup>79</sup>

After asserting herself with the postmaster, Mary eventually received her package. Others were not always so lucky. Packages often arrived damaged, opened with items missing, or were held, according to Naeve, “for weeks for nuisance sake.” The issue became so prevalent that in a newsletter to Box Project helpers, Virginia encouraged them to “INSURE ALL PACKAGES.” Southern black women often wrote about postal issues and other problems that they were having in their communities. In fact, they engaged regularly in provocative movement dialogue with northern associates who sympathized with their plight. Words that would normally go unspoken were verbalized when pencil met paper. After briefly explaining the bout with postal intimidation in a letter to Ms. Fisher, Mary was unable conceal her feelings about life in the

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<sup>79</sup> Mary Taylor to Mrs. Fisher, May 27, 1965, BPC.



Delta. “People or made and upset here they wont give us any jobs or any help and anyway but we are praying, working, and studying how to stop this war in our land.” Mary’s frustrations had reached a boiling point and writing letters may have provide one of the only outlets for Mary to safely and candidly voice her opinions.<sup>80</sup> The clandestine space of epistolary communication made this candor – with a white outsider – possible for southern blacks.

Similar frustrations were evident in letters of other rural women, tired of the systemic racism and injustice that plagued their lives. After explaining the “loan” scheme of her landlord, Besola Anderson wrote, “We have some dirty folks in Mississippi...They say we have to pay \$74.00 but they dropped them to \$70.00 amount...but how am I going to pay all that money back[?]”<sup>81</sup> Rural black families confined to sharecropping jobs were forced into relationships of dependency with plantation owners, who often gave loans to tenants and workers of the land with inflated interest rates and threatened eviction when loans were not paid. And when some families sought loans from landlords and plantation owners to pay medical bills, those requests were often denied:

I asked my boss man for 5 dolly Wednesday an he told me he aint got no money and drove off he made me felt so bad but I did not let on the way we work for him...but god bless me you sent me 5 dolly to carry my girl to the dr and may god bless you.<sup>82</sup>

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<sup>80</sup> Virginia Naeve, “The Mississippi Box Project,” *Fellowship*, May 1968, BPC; Naeve, FAMILY-TO-FAMILY PACKAGE PROJECT NEWSLETTER, January, 15, 1967, BPC; Dianne Leonetti to Virginia Naeve, February 4 1965, BPC. A packaged arrived south without the curtains that Mrs. Christine Rule requested for her helper. Elizabeth Flanagan to Virginia Naeve, May 10, 1967, BPC. Flanagan had hoped that this postal theft would not happen to “her” southern “family.” Mary Taylor to Mrs. Fisher, May 27, 1965, BPC.

<sup>81</sup> Besola Anderson to Myrtle Lane, October 7, 1967, BPC.

<sup>82</sup> Earnestine Peoples to Myrtle Lane, 1965 or 1967, BPC.

Communication with supportive outsiders may have encouraged some rural women to consider strategic ways to actively improve their lives. For some women, that meant standing up to racist federal employees; for others, that meant participating in some level of the Civil Rights movement. Armie Lee Walls, of Moorhead, Mississippi, recalls attending a mass meeting or two when she could find childcare.<sup>83</sup> Alice Rogers wrote of “working both day and night.” “I been picking cotton during the day,” explains Alice, “and working for freedom at night.”<sup>84</sup> Beauty Campbell asked a Mrs. Bernard to help her get in touch with “the freedom people in holly springs [Mississippi],” adding that she would “do anything I can to help them.”<sup>85</sup> Participation for some women simply meant exercising their civil rights by going to the polls. In August of 1965, just two months after the post office encounter, Mary went to Greenwood to attempt to register to vote for a second time, this time successfully. Heartened by the opportunity to “get the people we want to be in office,” Mary wrote to Virginia covering the specifics of the day: “A man came and picked us up and brought us back home everybody was very nice to us they was white people to.” Seemingly emboldened with newfound trust through her correspondence with Naeve and other northerners, Mary was able to register to vote after hopping in the car with what one can only assume were Civil Rights workers. In the same letter, Mary spoke of attending a mass meeting with her sister Martha after connecting with black Civil Rights worker, McKinley Marcus: “...We had a lone [long] talk. The mas meeting are getting better here I have got a

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<sup>83</sup> Armie Lee Walls interviewed by the author on September 24, 2014.

<sup>84</sup> Alice Rogers to Virginia Naeve, September 17, 1965, BPC.

<sup>85</sup> Beauty Campbell to Mrs. Bernard, June 1, 1966, BPC.

chance to go and leaned a lot and enjoyed it to.”<sup>86</sup> Contrary to common historical narrative, rural black women, stricken with poverty and worn from care of children, actively sought knowledge about the Civil Rights movement. Sometimes they used that knowledge to visibly participate or chose to use to uplift their communities in other ways.



Figure 6: Ruth Hooke’s (Box Project donor from Maine) visit to Maggie Pearl Montgomery’s family in Mississippi (1967). This image also indicates on some level how families were matched based on family commonalities. Maggie Peal and Ruth have young sons of nearly the same age and size, making the donation of clothing between the families logical. Image Courtesy of the Box Project Collection, Delta State University.

Letters traveling back and forth between Mississippians and outside allies must have had some effect on the level to which rural black women trusted the whites who had joined them in the Southern fight for freedom on the ground. Racial segregation was so ingrained in Mississippi

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<sup>86</sup> Mary Taylor to Virginia Naeve, August 1965, BPC; Mary Taylor to Mrs. Fisher, May 27, 1965, BPC.

that these epistolary avenues of communication were some of the first positive interactions black women had with whites. After six months of communicating with Mrs. Brook, Mary wrote “I have not [known] white people could ever love us...I hop you don’t mind me saying so but we have been afraid of white people. But I an not any more your kindness has chang me i wish we could cange our way and love everybody and not be afraid of each other.”<sup>87</sup> Others considered northern acquaintances to be some of their “most lovely friend[s].”<sup>88</sup> These epistolary relationships must have nurtured the trust needed for Mary to get in the car with an unknown white civil rights worker to vote.

In addition to fostering positive relationships between blacks and whites, the letters illuminate the civil rights activity and participation of an underrepresented, but large contingent of blacks living in rural Mississippi and surrounding areas at the height of the movement. Their participation was synonymous with survival, securing a better future for their families, and exercising their civil rights in an area where even the slightest movement could mean could mean injury or even death. Knowing the risks, rural black women took action regardless.

### **What Defines Activism?**

On September 18, 1963, Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr., delivered a solemn eulogy at the funeral of three of the four girls killed in the Sixteenth Street Church Bombing in Birmingham Alabama. King asserted that Addie Mae Collins, Carole Robertson, Cynthia Wesley, and Denise McNair, “victims of the most vicious, heinous crimes ever perpetrated against humanity,” had “something to say to each of us in their deaths.”

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<sup>87</sup> Mary Taylor to Mrs. Brook, July 9, 1965, BPC.

<sup>88</sup> Besola Anderson to Myrtle Lane, August 4, 1967, BPC.

They have something to say to every minister of the gospel who has remained silent behind the safe security of stained glass windows. They have something to say to every politician who has fed his constituents the stale bread of hatred and the spoiled meat of racism... They have something *to say to every Negro who passively accepts the evil system of segregation, and stands on the sidelines in the midst of a mighty struggle for justice...*<sup>89</sup>

In a somber, emotional appeal for action King had issued an indictment on those whose active participation in the Movement was neither visible, nor public. It was an indictment on those whose active participation did not look like his.

The constraints of motherhood and class kept many women from public participation but does this make them guilty of apathy? The belief that activism has a specific archetype has caused the daily struggles and modes of resistance through which rural black women operated to be overlooked. Sociologist Jenny Irons's study on the gendered and racial experiences of women participating in the Civil Rights Movement in Mississippi offers a framework to view and define the varying degrees of women's participation. Her study breaks down the participation of women into three distinct categories: high-risk activism, low-risk activism, and activist mothering.<sup>90</sup> Irons defines

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<sup>89</sup> Emphasis Added. James Melvin Washington, ed., *A Testament of Hope: The Essential Writings and Speeches of Martin Luther King, Jr.* (San Francisco: Harper and Row, 1986), 271.

<sup>90</sup> Jenny Irons, "The Shaping of Activist Recruitment and Participation: A Study of Women in the Mississippi Civil Rights Movement," *Gender and Society*, vol.12, no.4, (December 1998), 692, 698. Irons interviewed thirteen "visible" women of the Movement in Mississippi and women who were supporters of the movement in "gendered" or more "invisible roles." The racial breakdown of those interviewed is as follows: eight black women and five white women. Irons uses Sociologist Doug McAdams' definition of "high-risk," "Recruitment to High Risk Activism: The Case of Freedom Summer," *Journal of Society* (1992), 64-90. Irons defines high-risk experiences as the potential of "being beaten by police, hiding pictures of ones family to keep them from harm, or taking alternate routes home to protect personal safety," and argues that black women were more likely than white women to engage in high-risk activism because they had "more to gain."<sup>90</sup> Low-risk institutional activism would be considered participation "through organizations," often religious, such as the YWCA, as a "means to contribute to the Civil Rights movement without putting their lives in jeopardy."<sup>90</sup> Irons emphasizes that this was the route taken by middle-class white women in Mississippi; however,

*activist mothering* as the often invisible or overlooked skills related to “maternalism, nurturing, and domesticity.”<sup>91</sup> This style of activism has been embodied by the actions of working to middle-class black women who housed and fed Freedom Summer workers, clothed Freedom Riders jailed in the Mississippi State Penitentiary, and assisted in the implementation of in the Head Start Programs. Irons asserts that black women were the primary actors engaged in activist mothering in Mississippi.<sup>92</sup>

Irons’s study is helpful in understanding the constraints and subsequent methods used by women to engage in the Civil Rights Movement. However, the study appears to only define the actions of “self-defined” activists or participants in the Movement. Women activists like Clarie Collins Harvey or Fannie Lou Hamer fit neatly within the ascribed categories largely due their visibility as “activists.” Often serving as organizers in Civil Rights groups, some women were able to participate on a more visible level. Furthermore, affiliation with Civil Rights organizations granted them the agency and

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it could be argued, that middle-class black women participated in similar movement activity. For more information see Debbie Z. Harwell, “Wednesdays in Mississippi: Uniting Women Across Regional and Racial Lines, Summer 1964,” *Journal of Southern History*, vol. 76, no. 3 (August 2010). WIMS were meetings of Middle-class black and white women in Jackson, MS, to engage in positive conversations about the Civil Rights Movement.

Left out of the study or unclear from the study, but central to understanding the degrees to which women participated are the women’s backgrounds: Were these local women or transplants? What were the ages of the black women engaging in high-risk activism? What was their social class? Some of it can be assumed if they performed local activist mothering like housing student activist. Patricia Hill Collins writing also breaks down the varying degrees of activism by women.

<sup>91</sup> Additionally, Sociologist Nancy Naples defines *activist mothering* as “political activism as a central component of mothering and community caretaking of those who are not part of one’s defined household or family.” Nancy A. Naples, *Grassroots Warriors: Activist Mothering, Community Work and the War on Poverty* (New York: Routledge Press, 1998), 11.

<sup>92</sup> Irons, “The Shaping of Activist Recruitment and Participation,” 699-700.

mobility to act in the public sphere because of the organizations' support (financial, legal, or resistance training). Membership in notable organizations became the standard for what would be deemed activism or *activist mothering* and what would be deemed as sideline apathy. For a deeper understanding of women's participation, this work argues that historians should also consider the actions of women who were not self-defined activists – those who acted without organizational backing, and whose participation was hidden behind their mundane struggles of survival.

*Activist mothering* on many levels could appropriately define the actions of many women of the southern women of the Box Project. Though lacking in economic advantage, mobility, or agency, Mary Taylor and women like her still did their part to advance the movement in their communities by seeking resources for the poor, collaborating with other women, and broadcasting their needs North. Much was at stake for rural women who even exercised their civil rights in Southern states. Attempting to register to vote could cost them their jobs, housing, and even their lives. Furthermore, women, both Northern and Southern, chipped away at the very foundations of inequality, such as poverty, health care, and economic disparity along racial lines, that more high profile activist groups did not truly address until later on in the Movement. To the detriment of a wider understanding of women's roles in the Civil Rights Movement, the clandestine nature of their domestic and mundane participation has delayed any formal recognition of their involvement in the Movement.<sup>93</sup>

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<sup>93</sup> Nancy A. Naples, *Grassroots Warriors: Activist Mothering, Community Work and the War on Poverty* (New York: Routledge Press, 1998), 11; Elizabeth Sutherland Martinez, *Letters from Mississippi: Personal Reports from civil right volunteers of the 1964 Freedom Summer* (Brookline, MA: Zephyr Press, 2002), 41-67; Tiya Morris, "Clarie Collins Harvey: Transformative Vision of a World Citizen," *Journal of African American Studies*, vol. 17, issue 3 (September 2013); Raymond Arsenault, *Freedom Riders: 1962 and the Struggle for Racial Justice* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2006), 335.

Thousands of Delta women attempted to navigate the oppressive southern terrain the best way that they could. Whether her name was Mary Taylor of Itta Bena, Ophelia Sample of Cruger, or Armie Lee Walls of Moorhead, these women, who may have considered themselves handicapped with small children or excluded due to rural isolation, still found ways to engage in the movement. Through the Box Project, these women are revealed as active participants in the struggle, rather than static bystanders waving at the *real* Civil Rights workers.

The Box Project has provided a window through which we can appropriately affirm these women as “activist” mothers and clandestine advocates for justice. Though they may not by their own admission consider themselves activists or even participants, the actions of rural black women reveal the hostile climate in which they were forced to navigate. They sought food for their families when their husbands were laid off from work, acquired books and clothing so that children in the community could attend school, and challenged white postal workers to accomplish these goals.

To understand the experiences and actions of rural black women means taking a moment to look beyond the leaders of the Civil Rights movement to those they were seeking to serve, people seeking to merely survive. Found there are partners in the struggle and the people who most likely bore a brunt of the pain. The voices of rural black women should no longer be overlooked, but instead brought to the forefront so that all can grasp a more complete understanding of the Civil Rights Movement.

## **Afterword**

A trip to the Delta today, half a century later, will likely reveal that not much in the region has changed. The black population is still the majority, and unfortunately, most still live



in poverty. Schools remain segregated and so do towns. Year after year, the state of Mississippi generally ranks in the bottom five on studies measuring health, wealth, and education.

On the other hand, you may still see a black woman, now a great-grandmother, traveling to the post office to pick up a package from her box lady. One such woman is my maternal grandmother, Armie Lee Walls of Moorhead, Mississippi. These days, Armie does not particularly *need* the items sent to her from her Connecticut donor, Ann McGurk. Her eight children fared well in the decades that followed the tumultuous Civil Rights Movement. One of her daughters became a physician of obstetrics and gynecology after attending medical school at the University of Mississippi. Another reached the rank of major in the United States military before retiring in February of 2015. Her children are able to provide her with whatever comforts and amenities she desires. Nevertheless, she remains in communication with her box lady, receiving and exchanging recipes, family obituaries, and scraps of fabric for skirts and aprons. Her box lady is now her friend and the relationship has become one of mutual exchange. Were it not for women like Armie, who kept children fed, healthy, and in school, there would be far fewer members of the black middle class today.

The Box Project still exists, though under very different circumstances. Connecting families from the North and the South, the East and the West, the Project serves a fraction of those reached from the 1960s to 1990s.<sup>94</sup> One might consider this shift as a sign of the times, that the Movement has progressed or that the Movement is over and won.

I would argue, however, that the Movement remains very much in full swing. Today, disfranchised women continue to be constrained from full participation in the burgeoning movements of today due to poverty, isolation, and familial responsibilities. Organizers of fast

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<sup>94</sup> The Box Project assists nearly 800 families today, a great decline from the 10,000 served in the early 1990s; Morris, *Womanpower Unlimited*, 159.

food worker movements, home care worker movements, and other like-mobilizations relate the constraints of mothers unable to attend rallies and protests due to their inability to find childcare and pay for it with their poverty wages. Will they, too, be labeled apathetic and unaware due to their inability to visibly protest? How will those struggling to survive navigate today's problems while facing issues eerily reminiscent of the past? Will someone speak for them or will their unfiltered voices be heard? As these twenty-first century movements play out, only time will tell. I do hope, however, that if in fact the arc of the moral universe *does* bend toward justice, it will not take five decades for today's activist women and mothers to be acknowledged for the significant impact their sacrifice is making for the greater good.



Figure 7: Box Project helper from Connecticut, Ann McGurk, visited Armie Lee Walls of Moorhead, Mississippi, in 1996. The two women have cultivated an over thirty-year relationship through the exchange of goods and letters. They remain in contact today. Image in possession of the author.

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### **Interview(s)**

Armie Lee Walls, interviewed by the author, September 24, 2014.

### **Lectures and Presentations**

Quincy Mills, “SNCC Food for Freedom,” Association for Study of African American Life and History (ASALH) conference, Memphis, Tennessee, September 27, 2014.

## **Vita**

Pamela Walker graduated from the University of Tennessee at Knoxville in 2011 with a Bachelor of Arts degree in history and a minor in journalism and electronic media. After teaching English and history at Harding University High School in Charlotte, North Carolina, Pamela enrolled in the history masters program at the University of New Orleans in August of 2013. Pamela's intellectual interests include African American history and culture, 20<sup>th</sup> century American history, women and gender studies, and the history of the American South.