

Father Nathaniel and the Greenwood Movement

by Paul T. Murray

The Mississippi Delta town of Greenwood was a battleground of the civil rights movement during the 1960s. Starting in 1962, African American residents seeking to become registered voters repeatedly clashed with local authorities. After five years of determined effort, hundreds of arrests, dozens of assaults, shootings, and bombings, passage of two landmark civil rights bills, and a growing number of registered voters, Greenwood's African American community could point to few tangible gains from its struggle. Schools remained almost completely segregated, and no black person held elective office. There were no black police officers, no black firefighters, and no blacks employed at city hall except in menial capacities. African American customers in downtown stores were still called "boy" or "auntie" instead of being addressed as "Mister" or "Missus." If a black woman wanted to try on a hat she first had to cover her head with tissue paper. No blacks worked as clerks or salespeople in any white-owned store. Except for crime reports, the daily newspaper the *Greenwood Commonwealth* carried no coverage of events in the African American community.¹

In 1967, with white supremacy firmly entrenched and progress toward equality seemingly stalled, three clergymen formed a new organiza-

¹ Author's interview with Genevieve and Kathleen Feyen, Jackson, Mississippi, August, 12, 2010.

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tion called the Greenwood Movement, which launched a selective buying campaign to force businessmen and recalcitrant city officials to expand opportunities for African Americans. Over the next two years Greenwood Movement members maintained a highly effective boycott, resisted legal efforts to block their protest, defeated the mayor who refused to negotiate with them, and won a significant victory over segregation. Leading this revitalized protest was one of Mississippi's most unlikely civil rights heroes—a middle-aged white Roman Catholic priest, Father Nathaniel Machesky, O.F.M., who alienated white supporters of his missionary work when he emerged as a vigorous advocate for racial justice.

Father Nathaniel was born Robert Machesky on June 4, 1919, the fourth of five children of Peter and Matilda Kramp Machesky. The family lived in a Polish neighborhood of Detroit where Peter worked as a foreman for the Packard Motor Car Company.² Young Robert decided on the priesthood at an early age and entered the Sacred Heart Seminary in Detroit following eighth grade. After two years he moved to Wisconsin where he joined Franciscan Friars of the Assumption of the Blessed Virgin Mary Province. Ordained as Father Nathaniel in 1946, the young friar spent the next three years teaching high school English.³ But instructing Midwestern teenagers about Chaucer and Shakespeare was not the reason Nathaniel joined the Franciscan order; he yearned to spread Christ's Gospel as St. Francis had done. In an unpublished essay, he described his early aspirations: "As a student for the priesthood, he knelt many times in the seminary chapel begging Heaven through the Blessed Mother that he would be allowed to go to the poorest of the poor."⁴ In 1950 his superiors answered his prayers, dispatching him to join the fledgling Franciscan mission in Mississippi.

After a brief stint in Oxford, he came to Greenwood as assistant pastor at Immaculate Heart of Mary Church. However, ministering to a respectable all-white congregation was not Father Nathaniel's idea of true missionary work. Later that year the Franciscan friars received permission to establish a mission for African Americans. Father Nathaniel and Father Bonaventure Bolda searched for a property suitable for the church and school they envisioned. Eventually they found a vacant building located on twelve acres of land on the outskirts of town that

² Author's telephone interview with Pat Claramunt, January 5, 2011.

³ Letter to "Friars and Friends" from Assumption Provincial Office, September 23, 1995.

⁴ Manuscript in possession of Genevieve Feyen, Jackson, Mississippi.



"First Communion," Easter 1955, St. Francis School, Greenwood, Mississippi. Pictured from left are Jonathan G. Williams, Kenneth Rolling, Jerome Rolling, Father Nathaniel Machesky, Wilson Granger, Jeanne Patricia Williams, and James Alexander. Photo courtesy Andrew Brophy.

once had housed the Blue Moon café and nightclub. The Franciscans transformed the former juke joint into a place of worship and on December 16, 1950, celebrated the first mass at St. Francis of Assisi mission.

With only two black Catholics in Greenwood, Father Nathaniel faced the formidable task of attracting converts to fill his church. He believed the best way to increase his flock was by offering education to African American youngsters. Wearing the distinctive brown robe and sandals of his order, he walked door-to-door in the sweltering Mississippi summer recruiting students for the yet-to-be-opened school. He promised black parents that their children would receive an education superior to anything provided by Mississippi's underfunded and overcrowded black schools. To staff his school he persuaded the Franciscan Sisters of St. Joseph from Cleveland, Ohio, to send three nuns. When the doors of

Saint Francis School opened on September 4, 1951, twenty-two students appeared for kindergarten, first and second grades. Within two weeks the enrollment had increased to fifty-five.⁵ Since the school was a mile and a half distant from the center of the black community, Brother Adrian Kolanczk, an energetic young Franciscan newly arrived at the mission, drove the children to and from classes each day in a used bus donated by northern benefactors. Another grade was added in each subsequent year until eight grades were operational.⁶

Kate Foote Jordan was an important early convert whose energy and dedication allowed Father Nathaniel to expand the work of his mission. "Miss Kate," as she was known to all, was a widow from a prominent, white Greenville family.⁷ Raised an Episcopalian, Jordan came to Father Nathaniel seeking religious instruction. In 1951 she joined the Catholic Church and devoted her life to serving the poor. Miss Kate recruited other pious women to join her and in 1952 founded Pax Christi, a "secular institute" of religious women, with Father Nathaniel as their spiritual advisor. Members lived like nuns, remaining unmarried, vowing poverty, committing to aiding the poor, and wearing distinctive light blue uniforms, but unlike Catholic sisters, their vows were renewable on a yearly basis. They were not cloistered, but fully immersed in Greenwood's African American community. The number of "Center Ladies" steadily increased and by the mid-1960s Pax Christi numbered twenty dedicated members, including two African American women.⁸

Miss Kate opened the Saint Francis Information Center in a rented storefront on Walthall Street where she offered recreational activities for children and religious instruction for anyone curious about the Catholic faith. In 1953 Miss Kate moved the Center to larger quarters on Avenue I. There the "Center Ladies" provided an array of services including a medical clinic and dispensary, a store selling used clothing for dimes and quarters, Girl Scout and Boy Scout troops, music lessons and after

⁵ Georgette Griffin, personal communication, October 14, 2010.

⁶ A high school was added in the early 1960s but was discontinued in 1965 due to low enrollment.

⁷ One of her great-grandfathers was Charles Clark, a Confederate major general and governor of Mississippi 1863–65; her brother, also named Charles Clark, served as chief judge of the Fifth U.S. Circuit Court; longtime Speaker of the Mississippi House of Representatives Walter Sillers was a cousin, as was author and historian Shelby Foote.

⁸ "Pax Christi Franciscans," in possession of Carolyn Harris, Albany, New York.

school tutoring for children, and evening classes in typing, sewing, and bookkeeping for adults.⁹ The Center also published a weekly newspaper, the *Center Light*, to report events in the black community not covered in the *Greenwood Commonwealth*. Construction of a substantial wing in 1957 included a large combination recreation and meeting hall that allowed the Center to expand its youth programs. Roller skating was a popular attraction for teens; a troupe of accomplished skaters gave costumed and choreographed exhibitions throughout the Delta. Father Nathaniel was intimately associated with the work of the Center. Pax Christi member Kathleen Feyen recalled, "Every night when we would close the Center, a group of the priests would come over and we would have coffee ... in our little kitchen, and we would share the happenings of the day and plan what we were going to be doing later on."¹⁰ The Franciscan friar and Miss Kate forged a dynamic partnership, working together for the spiritual and material welfare of Greenwood's African American population.

Father Nathaniel's desire to improve the quality of life for African Americans went beyond traditional charitable works. Like Booker T. Washington, he believed that economic self-sufficiency was the key to black advancement. He organized the Greenwood Cooperative Club, which opened a market where members purchased groceries at prices substantially lower than at local stores. Because Greenwood banks seldom made loans to black borrowers, he established the St. Francis Federal Credit Union. When he discovered wild palms growing in forests outside of town, he directed parishioners who harvested and shipped the fronds to northern churches for Palm Sunday services. He also sponsored SER-Arts, a business that sold Brother Adrian's silk screened religious posters and cards.

At the end of his first decade in Mississippi Father Nathaniel could point to a growing congregation of black Catholics; a school that provided an excellent education to African American pupils; and a dedicated group of religious women providing badly needed services to Greenwood's poor. All of these programs existed in a rigidly segregated society. Whites monopolized economic and political power in Greenwood; blacks were second-class citizens. With the exception of the friars, nuns, and Center Ladies, blacks and whites lived in separate societies. Although local

⁹ Author's interview with Bessie Wilburn, Greenwood, Mississippi, August 9, 2010.

¹⁰ Feyen interview.

whites considered the Catholic missionaries' commitment to African Americans peculiar, the missionaries continued their charitable work without interference as long as they did not flout the prevailing doctrine of white supremacy.¹¹

Following the United States Supreme Court's *Brown v. Board of Education* decision, white Mississippians closed ranks to defend their way of life. In Greenwood, the Citizens' Council was the principal agency working to preserve racial segregation. White residents rallied behind the Council and provided a home for its state headquarters.¹² Nearly all influential whites belonged to the Council. According to factory manager Sidney Harris, even those who "weren't that racially biased" joined because of "social pressure."¹³ The bankers, merchants, business owners, and planters who made up the core of the Council's membership used their economic muscle to silence blacks who dared step out of line. With segregationists firmly in control, "every black knew ... [that] to get out of your place was to invite trouble."¹⁴ The same was true for Father Nathaniel who realized that in the South Catholics were viewed with suspicion. His activities in the black community could easily be seen as a threat to the racial status quo. During the 1950s and early 1960s the friar did not overtly challenge the Jim Crow system for fear of jeopardizing the success of his mission.

Greenwood's caste-like race relations were irrevocably shattered by the civil rights movement. With a large, almost completely disenfranchised African American population¹⁵ and a white establishment dominated by hardcore segregationists, the city made a tempting target for the young militants of the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee (SNCC). Twenty-three-year-old Sam Block, a SNCC field secretary from Cleveland, Mississippi, arrived in June of 1962 and began quietly encouraging local blacks to take the voter registration test. He soon was

¹¹ Kate Jordan's kinship to a prominent and politically influential Delta family undoubtedly provided a degree of protection for her activities. Author's interview with William Virden, January 20, 2011.

¹² Neil McMillen, *The Citizens' Council: Organized Resistance to the Second Reconstruction, 1954-64*, Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1971.

¹³ Interview conducted by Mark Conway, January 23, 1980. In possession of author.

¹⁴ Author's telephone interview with the Reverend William Wallace, August 19, 2010.

¹⁵ In Leflore County only 250 of 13,567 voting age blacks were registered voters in 1963. Pat Watters and Reese Cleghorn, *Climbing Jacob's Ladder: The Arrival of Negroes in Southern Politics* (New York: Harcourt, Brace & World, 1967), 59.

joined by Lawrence Guyot, Lavaughn Brown, and Willie Peacock. The quartet persisted in their organizing efforts in the face of daily threats, frequent arrests, numerous beatings, and attempted assassination. Despite constant intimidation, the number of blacks attempting to register at the Leflore County Courthouse steadily increased. On March 28, 1963, a group of forty people returning from an unsuccessful registration attempt were set upon by Greenwood police officers. Reverend Donald Tucker, the popular pastor of Turner Chapel AME Church, was attacked by a police dog. Community tension escalated to the point that the U.S. Justice Department intervened to head off further violence.¹⁶ The 1964 Freedom Summer project brought another influx of civil rights workers as SNCC temporarily moved fifty staff people and its national headquarters to Greenwood. In July, brothers Jake and Silas McGhee sat in the white section of the Leflore Theatre to test compliance with the recently passed Civil Rights Act. When word of their defiant action spread, the pair had to be rescued from a mob of two hundred hostile whites.¹⁷

The friars at St. Francis Church, the nuns teaching at St. Francis School, and the Pax Christi women at the St. Francis Center sympathized with African American aspirations and generally endorsed the civil rights movement's goals. Father Nathaniel admired the courage and dedication of the SNCC workers; however, he did not join their protests. The friar described his early involvement with the movement as "very, very low profile. We preached it [racial equality] but we didn't feel that we could demonstrate."¹⁸ Center Lady Genevieve Feyen recalled the instructions given by her leader: "Miss Kate advised us to keep our noses out of this [civil rights demonstrations]. So, for the most part, we just kept right on at our business and were careful where we went. We really didn't get very involved in all the freedom stuff."¹⁹ One reason for Jordan's reserved attitude was what she considered as

¹⁶ See John Dittmer, *Local People: The Struggle for Civil Rights in Mississippi* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1994); Clayborne Carson, *In Struggle: SNCC and the Black Awakening of the 1960s* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1981); Howard Zinn, *SNCC: The New Abolitionists* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1964).

¹⁷ Charles M. Payne, *I've Got the Light of Freedom: The Organizing Tradition and the Mississippi Freedom Struggle* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1995), 211.

¹⁸ Conway interview with Father Nathaniel.

¹⁹ Feyen interview.

the permissive lifestyle of some civil rights workers, especially young white women, which offended her straight-laced sensibilities. She told an interviewer, "There were a lot of girls that I didn't approve of—the way they dressed, of the way they conducted themselves."²⁰ Father Nathaniel explained that he originally believed aggressive protest and public confrontation were incompatible with the peaceable Franciscan way. Rather than demonstrating, sitting-in, or going to jail, he saw his role as preaching the gospel of Christian love and forgiveness in hopes of softening the hearts of Greenwood's whites.²¹

This stance fit well with the cautious approach of the long-serving prelate of Mississippi's Roman Catholic Diocese. Bishop Richard O. Gerow supported evangelical and charitable work among African Americans and defended their right to worship beside white Catholics, but, like most white Mississippians, took a dim view of civil rights "agitators." In particular, he opposed participation in civil rights protests by members of the clergy. Priests or nuns marching in demonstrations was, in his view, unseemly and inappropriate. He ordered priests of the Natchez-Jackson diocese to refrain from civil rights involvement. When the Council of Federated Organizations (COFO) brought one thousand northern volunteers to Mississippi for the 1964 Freedom Summer project, Gerow was certain disorder and violence would result. Historian Mark Newman documented how "Gerow told interested University of Notre Dame seminarians to decline participation [in Freedom Summer] and he sent six priests back to Oklahoma City after they had served one week [in Mississippi]."²² Gerow's vigilance extended to censoring controversial speakers. In 1963 Father Nathaniel asked his bishop's permission to invite Henry Cabirac, a well known Catholic advocate of interracial justice, to speak at St. Francis Church. Gerow refused, calling Cabirac a troublemaker and telling Machesky, "Get someone else."²³

Despite Gerow's prohibition of clerical activism, Father Nathaniel found ways to support the movement. In 1962 the Leflore County Board

²⁰ Interview conducted by Mark Conway, January 24, 1980. In possession of author.

²¹ Mark Conway, "'The Mills of God Grind Slowly': The Civil Rights Movement in Greenwood, Mississippi, During the Sixties," senior thesis, Middlebury College, 1981, 60.

²² Mark Newman, "The Catholic Church in Mississippi and Desegregation, 1963-1973," *Journal of Mississippi History*, Vol. LXVII, No. 4, 335.

²³ "Summary of Correspondence," December 4, 1963. Archives of the Catholic Diocese of Jackson, Jackson, Mississippi.

of Supervisors suspended distribution of federal surplus food commodities, a move widely believed to be in reprisal for black voter registration efforts. Northern friends of SNCC shipped tons of food and clothing to help hungry blacks survive the lean winter months. Fearing the wrath of powerful whites, Greenwood's black ministers refused to use their churches for the distribution of relief supplies. Historian John Dittmer reported, "At first only Father Nathaniel at the Catholic Center made his facility available."²⁴

The 1963 murder of state NAACP field secretary Medgar Evers by Greenwood resident Byron de la Beckwith was a blow designed to cripple the state's nascent civil rights movement. Mourners at Evers's Jackson funeral pledged themselves to continue his fight for racial justice. Chantal Batten, then a Franciscan nun teaching at St. Francis School, remembered, "Father Nathaniel took us to the funeral."²⁵ The white priest and nuns undoubtedly attracted considerable attention among the largely black congregation.

Jake McGhee was one of Greenwood's leading homegrown civil rights activists. Members of his family were among the first to welcome SNCC workers. The McGhee home was a repeated target for night riders' bullets. Because of Jake's identification with the movement, no white employer would hire him. When McGhee approached Father Nathaniel about a job, he was more successful. Pax Christi member Kathleen Feyen recalled how McGhee found work at the Saint Francis Center: "I suppose he came to Father [Nathaniel] and Father told Miss Kate to hire him. So, he was our janitor for years."²⁶ With a secure job McGhee was able to support his family and continue pressing for civil rights.

Following the 1964 presidential election, the Mississippi Freedom Democratic Party (FDP) challenged the seating of Mississippi's five congressional representatives on the grounds that African American citizens had been denied the right to vote. Attorneys preparing the case for the FDP needed sworn affidavits from blacks who had been turned away from the polls. Unable to secure a friendly venue elsewhere, the lawyers approached Father Nathaniel, who let them take their depositions in classrooms at Saint Francis School.²⁷

²⁴ Dittmer, *Local People*, 146.

²⁵ Author's telephone interview with Chantal Batten, December 15, 2010.

²⁶ Feyen interview.

²⁷ "FDP Depositions," document in the archives of St. Francis Mission.

Mississippi segregationists viewed federal anti-poverty programs with misgivings because they operated on an integrated basis, without control by local politicians. Father Nathaniel was an early and enthusiastic backer of Systematic Training and Redevelopment (STAR), an adult education and job training program sponsored by the Catholic diocese and funded in 1965 by an initial \$7 million grant from the Office of Economic Opportunity. Father Nathaniel served on STAR's board of directors and established one of the most active of its sixteen centers on church property. The leaders of the program offended segregationists by hiring a bi-racial staff and recruiting poor whites for its classes. Statewide, 55 percent of STAR's employees were African American and 13 percent of its trainees were white.²⁸

On June 16, 1966, the March Against Fear arrived in Greenwood. Begun by James Meredith, the first African American student to be enrolled at the University of Mississippi, the march promoted voter registration among black Mississippians. When Meredith was shot from ambush, what started out as a quixotic solo crusade mushroomed into a media event as national civil rights leaders took up Meredith's cause. After Greenwood police jailed Stokely Carmichael, the march's fiery spokesman, Father Nathaniel posted bail for the SNCC chairman. According to Bill Virden, whose family supported the St. Francis Center, the priest took this action to avert a race war: "If he [Nathaniel] hadn't done it, it [Greenwood] would have been burned to the ground. There would have been hundreds and hundreds and hundreds of people killed. It was that close to an explosion."²⁹

By 1967 it seemed that the Greenwood civil rights movement had run out of steam. The SNCC organizers who provided much of the leadership for local protest efforts drifted away. After the intense confrontations of 1963 and 1964, Greenwood activists felt that nothing was happening. Silas McGhee recalled, "after SNCC left ... people decided to go back to school and they going (sic) other places and the movement just died out completely."³⁰ Support for the FDP declined as moderate NAACP leaders joined with liberal white Young Democrats to form a bi-racial coalition to replace the all-white "regular" Democrats. A number of

black activists found jobs in anti-poverty programs such as STAR and Head Start. Veteran civil rights worker James Moore blamed the federal initiatives for the decline in civil rights organizing: "Most of the people are in these programs under the federal government. You aren't allowed to demonstrate or participate in political action while working in the poverty program."³¹

In the fall of 1967 the first sign of a resurgent Greenwood movement appeared. Father Nathaniel met with Mayor Charles E. Sampson and tried to persuade the hardcore segregationist to take a few small steps toward racial reconciliation, but the mayor refused to budge. The Franciscan then wrote an impassioned editorial in the *Center Light* declaring that if blacks were ever going to break down Jim Crow barriers they needed power and that power could come only from organization. The most controversial passage of his broadside said, "perhaps the only route to sanity is revolution. We do not like the term, but unless there is a serious change of heart soon there's no other course."³² According to one account, "[t]he editorial inspired a handfull (sic) of people in the black community" to meet in an effort to revive the dormant local movement.³³

Another event contributing to the protest was the decision to exclude the nationally known Mississippi Valley State College marching band from Greenwood's annual Christmas parade. The parade "was huge," recalled Danny Collum, then an eighth grade student. "We got the day off of school. Bands from all over. It went on for hours."³⁴ The city fathers' determination to keep the parade an all-white affair fired more resentment in the black community.

It was about this time that formation of a new civil rights organization—the Greenwood Movement—was announced. Father Nathaniel was co-chair with Reverend Malvin J. Black, pastor of Turner Chapel AME Church, and Reverend William Wallace, who presided over Jennings Temple CME Church. None of the clergymen had openly joined SNCC's voter registration drives or FDP organizing; neither had they participated in street demonstrations nor held positions in earlier protest groups. The trio now resolved it was time to assume a more prominent

²⁸ Newman, "The Catholic Church in Mississippi," 344-48.

²⁹ Virden interview.

³⁰ Interview with Silas McGhee, July 12, 1969, Washington, D.C.: Civil Rights Documentation Project, 10.

³¹ James Moore interview, July 18, 1967, Wisconsin Historical Society.

³² Quoted in Conway, "The Mills of God," 60.

³³ Ibid.

³⁴ Author's telephone interview with Danny Collum, January 13, 2011.

role in the struggle. Their decision signaled the emergence of a new, religiously based, civil rights leadership in Greenwood.

The goals articulated by the Greenwood Movement were easily communicated—African Americans wanted respect and jobs. Respect took the form of courtesy titles and polite treatment in stores and public offices. Access to employment opportunities was equally important. White merchants profited from the trade of African American customers; some depended almost entirely on black trade, yet none hired blacks as clerks, cashiers, or sales people. African American tax dollars helped pay salaries of workers in Greenwood's police, fire, street, and sanitation departments, but no black held a position of responsibility in any municipal agency. To achieve these goals the Movement leaders called for a boycott of all white merchants. The only businesses exempted from the ban were the post office, banks, doctors' offices, and drug stores, for the purpose of obtaining medicine.

During the Depression, African American protest organizations used consumer boycotts in Harlem and other northern ghettos. "Don't Buy Where You Can't Work" campaigns forced white store owners to hire black workers.³⁵ Economic pressure also was an important but little-noted aspect of other civil rights protests such as the student lunch counter sit-ins and the Birmingham demonstrations. In Mississippi, a boycott of downtown merchants was part of the 1963 Jackson protest. NAACP leader Charles Evers organized boycotts of white-owned stores in Natchez, Fayette, and Port Gibson with impressive results.³⁶ Leaders of the Greenwood Movement were familiar with these efforts and believed the same approach could be effective in their city.

As Martin Luther King, Jr., showed in Montgomery, the consumer boycott is a weapon well suited for people with few resources other than their combined purchasing power. Direct action tactics like sit-ins left participants subject to arrest, imprisonment, and physical violence. Even attempting to register to vote invited white reprisals. Selective buying was a private act and did not involve lawbreaking; participants could not

³⁵ See Ralph L. Crowder, "Don't Buy where You Can't Work": An Investigation of the Political Forces and Social Conflict within the Harlem Boycott of 1934." *Afro-Americans in New York Life and History*, 15, (1991), 7-44.

³⁶ See Emilye Crosby, *A Little Taste of Freedom: The Black Freedom Struggle in Claiborne County, Mississippi* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2005), for a detailed account of the 1966-67 Port Gibson boycott.

be punished for failing to purchase goods.³⁷ As long as protesters could obtain necessary supplies from alternative sources, the boycott was a viable but difficult tool. The key to success was achieving and sustaining a unified and disciplined base. If a significant number of people failed to honor picket lines, their neighbors would be unwilling to make the sacrifices an effective boycott required. Building community support was the greatest challenge faced by leaders of the Greenwood Movement.

Father Nathaniel and his fellow ministers launched their effort on December 6 during the Christmas shopping season when retail businesses were most vulnerable. Many merchants, especially those selling clothing and household goods, depended on December sales to ensure a favorable balance sheet for the year. The primary targets of the 1967 boycott were stores on the south side of the city catering to an African American clientele. Some owners were badly hurt by reduced purchases and quickly capitulated. Liberty Cash Market and Mid-West Dairy were among the first to promote black workers to more responsible positions. An open letter published in the *Center Light* of January 1968 exempted from the boycott "certain designated stores on Johnson Avenue which have hired Negro clerks and salespeople."³⁸ After early compliance, however, the boycott fell apart as black customers returned to the stores. According to Kathleen Feyen, "They were doing okay with it until it got too close to Christmas;" then the boycott "kind of died out."³⁹ Although the Greenwood Movement continued to draw fifty or so people to weekly meetings at the St. Francis Center, by February the boycott had ceased.

On February 11, 1968, 1,300 black Memphis sanitation workers walked off their jobs to protest years of discriminatory treatment and the accidental deaths of two fellow workers. Their strike attracted national attention when Martin Luther King, Jr., traveled to Tennessee in support of their cause. Memphis' proximity to the Mississippi Delta made it easy for King to swing down to Greenwood to recruit participants for the Poor People's Campaign, his next major crusade. On March 16 King spoke at Jennings Temple CME church. An enthusiastic crowd of 250 people jammed into the small chapel while 200 more gathered on the

³⁷ When white merchants asked blacks why they stopped patronizing their stores, the former customers often cited fear of reprisals from boycott "enforcers." This was an excuse the storekeepers readily believed.

³⁸ *Center Light*, January 12, 1968.

³⁹ Feyen interview.

street outside to hear King's message. The next morning King visited students at St. Francis School. Three weeks later he was struck down by an assassin's bullet.

On the morning of April 5 teachers at St. Francis School tried to cope with their pupils' grief over King's murder. Chantal Batten recalled what happened in her classroom that morning: "The children rushed in yelling, 'We hate you! We hate all you white teachers.'" ⁴⁰ In town, hundreds of irate African American students poured out of Threadgill High School in a spontaneous protest. They were intercepted by Reverend Aaron Johnson, pastor of the First Christian Church, who closed his barber shop and urged the youths to halt. ⁴¹ He pointed out that Greenwood was crawling with local and state police who wouldn't hesitate to use their weapons to disperse the demonstrators. He persuaded most of the youths to gather in nearby Jennings Temple. Reverend William Wallace also feared the consequences of an unorganized parade downtown: "I had an idea what the state troopers would do because I had seen what they had done previously." The Methodist minister addressed the students and "told them there was a better way to handle this." ⁴² He urged them to formulate a set of demands and organize a more disciplined demonstration. Meanwhile, Reverend Johnson and Father Nathaniel rushed to City Hall where they pleaded with Mayor Sampson to issue a parade permit. Although Sampson was a long-time adversary of the civil rights movement, he feared a disorderly protest and granted their request.

The next afternoon a crowd estimated at between 1,000 and 1,500 marched through the streets of Greenwood under the watchful eyes of heavily armed Mississippi National Guard troops. The mourners kept their emotions in check. The *Greenwood Commonwealth* reported, "Police reported no trouble from the large crowd. The march was termed as very peaceful." ⁴³ In front of the Leflore County Courthouse the demonstrators listened to speakers who memorialized King and urged fellow blacks to channel their frustration in constructive directions. That meant resumption of the boycott. The murder in Memphis provided the spark that got the Movement moving again. Its leaders soon amended the name of their organization to the "Greenwood Movement in Honor

⁴⁰ Batten interview.

⁴¹ Payne, *I've Got the Light of Freedom*, 326.

⁴² Wallace interview, 2010.

⁴³ *Greenwood Commonwealth*, April 6, 1968.

of Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr.," to remind everyone of the connection. For the next twenty months the Movement carried out a highly effective boycott that wrested the first concessions from Greenwood's white merchants and political leaders.

Father Nathaniel's decision to move into the spotlight was especially difficult. For five years he had avoided identification with the civil rights movement as he sought to maintain the connections with Greenwood whites he had built over the past eighteen years. Taking a prominent role in the Movement would sever these ties. Local merchants, especially Lebanese Catholic store owners, had supported St. Francis Church, School, and Center with donations of cash and merchandise. These gifts would cease if their stores became boycott targets. On a personal level, the priest enjoyed the hospitality of several white Catholic families; he often shared drinks and dinner in their homes; he golfed with them at the country club and joined them for bridge in the evenings. These invitations would stop once his involvement became known. There also was a very real danger to his colleagues and to the institutions he had labored for nearly two decades to build. The church, school, and center were vulnerable to attacks by night-riders. Terrorists had firebombed and shot into the McGhee home located down the highway from St. Francis Church. The Ku Klux Klan was active, and Byron de la Beckwith, the unconvicted assassin of Medgar Evers, was at large in Greenwood. Bullets fired by an unseen assailant could bring Father Nathaniel's good work to an untimely end.

Catholic businessman Alex Malouf, Jr., understood the dilemma Father Nathaniel faced: "He had a decision to make whether he was going to support the blacks or the whites. It really wasn't a choice for him. There was no choice." ⁴⁴ Father Nathaniel's conscience would not let him shirk what he saw as his duty to his parishioners. He knew their demands were just; what they were asking for was no more than the rights all citizens should enjoy. It was a lose-lose situation. Whatever path he chose, Father Nathaniel faced serious consequences, yet he did not flinch. He cast his lot with Greenwood's long-suffering African American population.

Attendance increased dramatically at the Greenwood Movement's April 7 meeting. Father Nathaniel described the irrepressible mood at that Sunday gathering: "They didn't say 'I want to join the Movement,'

⁴⁴ Author's telephone interview with Alex Malouf, Jr., August 17, 2010.

they just felt ‘we are the Movement.’”⁴⁵ Before announcing a resumption of the boycott, the leadership trio made one last attempt to discuss their grievances with city officials. Mayor Sampson flatly refused to meet with them. The *Greenwood Commonwealth* would not print a paid advertisement requesting a meeting between representatives of the black and white communities. Movement leaders found all avenues of communication blocked.

On April 9, the day of King’s Atlanta funeral, members of the Movement, meeting at the St. Francis Center, voted to resume the boycott of white-owned stores that discriminated in their hiring practices or their treatment of black customers. Detailed demands were spelled out in an open letter distributed to 3,000 homes throughout the city. The Movement’s “first and most important objective” was “the establishment of communications among all citizens of Leflore County.” To begin a dialogue the leaders proposed establishing a permanent human relations commission to “mediate all problems of mutual concern.” Second, they insisted that “fair employment practices be adopted by all employers,” both private businesses and municipal agencies. Singled out for special mention were the police, fire, street, and sanitation departments. A third demand was that municipal services “be rendered all citizens on a fair and impartial basis.” Specific issues included establishment of a city housing authority, integration of public schools, desegregation of recreational facilities, and improved services in the black community, including garbage collection, street cleaning, working sewer lines, and paved streets. To ensure these changes occurred, the Movement insisted that “Black persons be named to all Commissions responsible for providing health, educational, cultural, recreational, and other services.” Underlying each of these specific demands was the desire to be treated with consideration and respect. Here too, specific reforms were prescribed: the use of courtesy titles for black customers, “the abandonment of all that smacks of condescension and paternalism,” and “genuine regard for the feelings of others.”⁴⁶

The newly energized Greenwood Movement was publicly committed to Martin Luther King’s non-violent philosophy. At a time when black militants openly advocated armed self-defense, the three Movement

co-chairs rejected this path. Mary Booth, a youthful veteran of SNCC’s voter registration drives observed, “now we are not as militant as we were then. This movement is based on love and non-violence, although SNCC was non-violent to a certain extent, but this movement is really based on love, law, and non-violence.”⁴⁷ The Movement’s frequently stated allegiance to King’s principles won it broad support in the black community. In the early 1960s only a small fraction of Greenwood’s African American population rallied behind SNCC’s frontal challenge to white supremacy. By selecting leaders not involved in the earlier protests and avoiding the rhetorical excesses of Black Power advocates, the Movement reached a wider constituency and gained the backing of more conservative elements in the black community. Activists remaining from the SNCC/FDP years accepted these changes, even if they did not wholeheartedly embrace them, and continued working with the reconstituted movement. Mary Booth served as the Movement’s executive director; James Moore headed its picketing committee; and Jake McGhee was one of the most faithful pickets.

The leaders of the Greenwood Movement described their organization as an independent, home-grown entity not connected with national civil rights groups such as the NAACP or the Southern Christian Leadership Conference (SCLC). An affiliation with SCLC seemed like a natural link. Indeed, representatives of King’s organization made overtures which were politely but firmly rebuffed. Paramount among the reasons for this rejection was the mass protest tactics favored by SCLC. According to Father Nathaniel, “[They wanted] us to march every single day—with or without a permit—and as many marched would be arrested. They wanted us to fill up the jails completely.”⁴⁸ He believed his organization could mount an effective boycott without sending hundreds of people to jail.

The Movement’s co-chairs understood that no matter how popular its goals or how intense the anger over King’s murder, the boycott would not succeed without a solid foundation. They formed committees responsible for picketing, negotiating, public relations, office staffing, finance, and law. At the Movement’s heart was a military-style system of neighborhood organizing. Father Nathaniel explained its structure:

⁴⁵ Conway, “Mills of God,” 66.

⁴⁶ “The Greenwood Movement,” June 27, 1968, pamphlet in the archives of St. Francis Mission.

⁴⁷ Interview with Mary Booth, August 7, 1968. The Civil Rights Documentation Project, Washington, D.C.

⁴⁸ Conway, “Mills of God,” 68.

“Greenwood and the surrounding areas are divided into 22 zones, each headed by a ‘major.’ Five ‘colonels’ are over the operation while ‘captains’ are responsible for visiting each home on their block, explaining the boycott and urging people to observe the picket lines.”⁴⁹ Promoting voter registration was another duty of the block captains. They learned which of their neighbors were not yet registered and encouraged them to join the ranks of enfranchised citizens. These local agents of the Movement also kept the leadership in touch with the membership, conveying local needs and complaints to the executive committee. The Movement maintained an office staffed by volunteers in the St. Francis Center. The Center’s printing press produced flyers and leaflets.



Micki Huber (left) and Patricia Livingston picketing in Greenwood. Photo courtesy Genevieve and Katherine Feyen

how pickets should behave. Specific instructions included marching four to five feet apart, making about-face turns, no blocking of doorways, and continuous movement.⁵⁰ “Go as close to the curb as you could get,” Genevieve Feyen remembered. Her sister Kathleen added, “keep mov-

⁴⁹ John Pearce, “Negro Boycott Shows Effect,” *Memphis Commercial Appeal*, April 28, 1968.

⁵⁰ *Center Light*, June 21, 1968.

ing, and don’t talk to anybody. You couldn’t say, ‘Don’t go in there to shop.’ You could not talk to anybody. You had to keep moving.”⁵¹ The daily presence of Center Ladies on the picket line ensured a racially integrated protest that Greenwood whites resented. David Jordan, head of the Leflore County Voters League, remembered,

[W]e did go downtown and Kathleen Feyen and two of the other ladies was with us, and some of the local whites didn’t like the idea that they were talking to us and we were always picketing and marching together. They would come back and say, “Miss Feyen, you ought to be ashamed of yourself. You know better than this.” ... [B]ut she wouldn’t pay any attention, [she] just smiled at them and kept going.⁵²

Micki Huber, a Center Lady, reported similar experiences on picket duty: “We had a lot of insults thrown at us. Of course, because we were white on a black picket line, it was a very rough thing for some people to handle.”⁵³ Not all of the Pax Christi members and few of the nuns or priests carried placards in front of the stores, but the visible participation of even a few Catholics was enough to brand anyone associated with St. Francis as an agitator.

“Spotters” kept watch on city streets, taking down names of shoppers not honoring the boycott. Violators whose names appeared on the “black list” were visited at their homes and encouraged not to shop at the targeted stores. Peer pressure was the Movement’s most potent weapon. Mary Fluker described how boycotters dealt with neighbors who continued patronizing white-owned businesses:

We talked about them like they were dogs in church and in class and in clubs. Now, we didn’t call anybody’s name, but we said, “Now, *some* of you are silly enough, foolish enough, or hate your race bad enough, to sneak in a back door and buy things.” That kind of cooled them down. ... Pride kept a lot of people out [of the stores]. They didn’t want anyone to see them going in at all, so they stayed out.⁵⁴

⁵¹ Feyen interview.

⁵² Author’s interview with Senator David Jordan, Greenwood, Mississippi, August 9, 2010.

⁵³ Author’s interview with Micki Huber, October 6, 2010.

⁵⁴ Interview conducted by Mark Conway, January 28, 1980. In possession of author.

Greenwood police kept close watch on the pickets with at least one officer stationed on each block.⁵⁵ Micki Huber recalled, "My first day [on the picket line] there was a policeman walking next to us clicking his gun. It was scary."⁵⁶ During the first month of picketing, however, only one person was arrested for disorderly conduct and a second for profanity. Compared to their heavy-handed treatment of demonstrators a few years earlier, the behavior of the Greenwood police was restrained.

Mass meetings were held at the St. Francis Center, at first once a week and then, during the height of the boycott, as often as three times weekly. These assemblies featured speakers who roused the spirits of Movement supporters, reinforced discipline among the troops, delivered news of merchants who had reached agreements with boycott leaders, reminded listeners which businesses remained on the boycott list, and reported developments in efforts to meet with Greenwood's white establishment. Another more controversial feature of the meetings was publicly reading the names of persons violating the boycott.⁵⁷ Father Nathaniel insisted this happened infrequently, but he could not stop Movement backers from circulating the names of blacks observed shopping in white-owned stores.

Later in the year, meetings were held at Jennings Temple and other cooperating churches, but Movement leaders were frustrated in their efforts to get Baptist churches on board. According to Reverend Wallace, they "would really not take any leadership in any of this movement." He attributed this to Baptist ministers being hired by their congregations rather than being appointed by bishops as Methodist and Catholic clergy were.⁵⁸ Baptist deacons, with some justification, feared their buildings might be destroyed if they hosted civil rights meetings.⁵⁹ In addition, preachers at small Baptist congregations were financially dependent on the good will of local whites. According to David Jordan, they "were fearful because when they got ready for an appreciation or anniversary,

⁵⁵ Overtime wages for police officers monitoring the boycott cost the city an estimated \$10,000.

⁵⁶ Huber interview.

⁵⁷ *Greenwood Commonwealth*, June 12, 1968.

⁵⁸ Wallace interview, 2010.

⁵⁹ Thirty-seven black churches were burned or bombed during Mississippi's 1964 Freedom Summer. Doug McAdam, *Freedom Summer* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1988).

they would go downtown to certain business folks and get \$200-\$300 to help them out." This gave white merchants leverage; they would ask, "Well, you know Reverend, I don't mind helping you but you ain't with that [civil rights] crowd?"⁶⁰

Unlike the earlier, unsuccessful boycott, compliance with the renewed campaign was almost complete in its early weeks. Motivated by the assassination of Martin Luther King, Jr., African Americans stayed away from the targeted stores and some white shoppers, fearing possible violence, also took their business elsewhere. An Associated Press story, two weeks after the selective buying campaign resumed, claimed that the boycott was having a major economic impact. It described the scene one Saturday in late April, normally the busiest day of the week: "[W]hite merchants along Carrollton Street and Howard Street waited on white customers almost exclusively. There were no Negroes except those carrying signs and working in stores." The unnamed manager of a downtown department store said, "As far as I can tell it's nearly 100 per cent effective. I don't mind telling you I'm down this month when I should be up because of Easter buying."⁶¹ Harry C. Hall, operator of the Shipley Donut Shop, complained, "My business is off 30 percent weekdays and on Saturdays it has cut my business 50 percent."⁶² "They were killing us," recalled Alex Malouf, Jr., who worked in his parents' furniture store on Carrollton Street at the time.⁶³ Mayor Sampson, however, disputed these assessments. "We've got a lot of good Negroes in Greenwood who are going about their business shopping where they want to and in general conducting themselves like they should,"⁶⁴ he said. The mayor placed responsibility for instigating the boycott squarely on the shoulders of Father Nathaniel and his fellow Franciscans: "It's just a bunch of Catholic priests out there trying to run the whole country. We're not going to discuss it with them. They're just agitators sent in here. They've been sent in here for just this purpose."⁶⁵

⁶⁰ Jordan interview.

⁶¹ "Negro Boycott Shows Effect," *Memphis Commercial Appeal*, April 28, 1968.

⁶² *Greenwood Commonwealth*, June 13, 1968.

⁶³ Malouf interview.

⁶⁴ "Boycott Story Disputed by Greenwood Mayor," *Jackson Daily News*, May 1, 1968.

⁶⁵ *Jackson Daily News*, April 29, 1968.

It wasn't long before extreme elements in the white community counterattacked. An anonymous hate sheet titled "A Delta Discussion," widely believed to be the voice of the Ku Klux Klan, printed a scurrilous attack on Father Nathaniel and issued a thinly veiled threat to close St. Francis Church.

For years the negro [*sic*] ROMAN CATHOLIC CENTER on Ave. I has been turning out huge quantities of anti-white, anti-Protestant, pro-communist literature and it's [*sic*] so-called "priest," FATHER NATHANIAL [*sic*] is known to have several negro [*sic*] "girl friends" in his harem out there. His presence in Greenwood has long ago ceased to be necessary or desirable. The cesspool known as SAINT FRANCIS MISSION out on hiway [*sic*] 82 East is also a hotbed of integration and agitation. It could and should be removed from the local scene and would never be missed.⁶⁶

Night riders fired shots into St. Francis Church, one bullet lodging in the wooden cross over the altar. Sister Chantal reported that one day as she was walking around the grounds at the mission she saw Father Nathaniel's car with its rear window shattered. He told her that "as he was driving 'someone' had shot several bullets into the car window, not to kill him but to give him a message."⁶⁷ Telephone threats were a daily occurrence. Kathleen Feyen described the situation at the St. Francis Center: "[We got] telephone calls galore telling us where to go in no uncertain terms." One teen working at the Center asked Kate Jordan how to respond to the threatening calls. Jordan told her to answer, "Thank you and God bless you." After two hours answering hostile calls, the young woman begged for relief: "I God blessed everybody in Leflore County today," she said.⁶⁸ Dealing with death threats became routine. One caller asked Miss Kate where she wanted her bullet, "in the front or back?" She calmly replied, "Wherever you want to put it."⁶⁹ One night during the boycott a firebomb was thrown at the St. Francis Center, igniting the roof of an adjacent building. The Pax Christi members who shared a house a block away from the Center received a call from

⁶⁶ "A Delta Discussion—V," archives of St. Francis Mission.

⁶⁷ Batten interview.

⁶⁸ Feyen interview.

⁶⁹ Interview conducted by Mark Conway, January 24, 1980, in possession of author,

neighbors saying, "There's a fire on your roof, go check it out."⁷⁰ The fire was extinguished without major damage.

Father Nathaniel also was abused over the phone and in written messages. The priest took these threats seriously. Despite his advocacy on non-violence, he began carrying a pistol for self-defense. Father Peter Machesky, Father Nathaniel's younger brother, also a Franciscan friar, acted as his brother's bodyguard and sometimes stood vigil outside the church with a loaded rifle while Father Nathaniel said mass inside. The Franciscans slept more easily after they purchased a pair of Dobermans to patrol the grounds of their compound. In the summer of 1968, the attacks on Father Nathaniel escalated. The author of "A Delta Discussion" wrote:

The local arm of the Communist Conspiracy has grouped itself into what it calls THE GREENWOOD MOVEMENT. This outfit is being led by a black-hearted Catholic "priest" with a white face and a blood red political philosophy. His name—NATHANIEL MACHESKY—has appeared in previous bulletins. He has been allowed to carry on his revolutionary activities here in Greenwood much too long. He will one day leave here, one way or another.⁷¹

According to a story repeated by Father Nathaniel's friends and associates, the Klan decided to end his civil rights crusading by putting a contract on his life. Bill Virden, who regarded the friar as a father figure, related this account as told by Father Peter Machesky:

One day there was this knock on the door of the rectory. Nathaniel goes out there, he opens the door and this white dude is out there. The guy asked him, he said, "Is Father Nathaniel around? I need to talk to him." Nathaniel says, "You're talking to him. Why don't you come in? I'll fix you a cup of coffee." And the guy said, "No. I just need to be sure that I knew who you were because I've been paid \$10,000 by the KKK to kill you. Sometime in the next thirty days when you're walking back and forth between here and that church I'm going to kill you deader than a hammer." Nathaniel asked him again, "Why don't you just come on in and we can talk about it?" He came back thirty days later; knocked on the door. Nathaniel happened to answer the door again. Here's this same

⁷⁰ Feyen interview.

⁷¹ "A Delta Discussion—Issue VI," June 5, 1968, St. Francis Mission Archives.

guy, and the guy told him, “I gave the money back. “ He said, “You’re the bravest man I ever saw. I couldn’t kill you.”⁷²

White Catholics operating businesses affected by the boycott vented their anger at Father Nathaniel. Those who had supported his missionary work ceased their contributions to St. Francis Church. Alex Malouf, Jr., described the reaction of one such merchant:

I remember one of the guys who owned a shoe store. A nun had come by to get some shoes, and they never did charge them for shoes. Whatever you wanted you just got. ... Two weeks later the nun was wearing the shoes he gave her [while] boycotting his store. All of these guys were getting very upset.⁷³

One hundred and thirty members of Immaculate Heart of Mary parish, where the Franciscans celebrated Sunday mass when the pastor was out of town, signed a petition demanding that the friars no longer be allowed to set foot in their church. Sidney Harris summarized the attitude of most white Catholics toward the priest who was leading the boycott: “Father Nathaniel was regarded as a trouble maker *par excellence*. And everybody would say how nice we were to him when he came down and established his mission and helped him and he turned on us. He was a traitor.”⁷⁴ One anonymous letter writer ranted in the *Greenwood Commonwealth* that members of Immaculate Heart of Mary parish were

outraged by the attacks against us and fellow members of our community by Fr. Nathaniel Machesky and other intruder priests and nuns from the St. Francis Mission ... As a result of his efforts to injure or ruin innocent persons by economic strangulation, many [white] Catholics view Fr. Nathaniel and his street-walker nuns and priests as public sinners who are violating the commandments of God.⁷⁵

The boycott was felt most severely by stores on the south side of town. On April 24 owners of seventeen Johnson Street businesses met with the Greenwood Movement’s negotiating committee. They promised to institute fair hiring practices and use courtesy titles with black

⁷² Virden interview. While this tale sounds implausible, it was repeated in the presence of Father Nathaniel who did not contradict its veracity.

⁷³ Malouf interview.

⁷⁴ Interviewed by Mark Conway, January, 1980, in possession of author.

⁷⁵ Conway, “Mills of God,” 76.

customers. In addition, they petitioned the city council requesting that it meet with the Movement’s executive committee to establish “channels of communication.” Their message said, in part, “We consider the economic problems facing the entire community to be urgent and feel that action is necessary now!”⁷⁶ Their letter persuaded leaders of the Movement to lift the boycott of these stores. The June issue of “A Delta Discussion” denounced the store owners who settled with the Movement, urging “all white people” of Greenwood to remember their capitulation and withdraw their business from these stores.⁷⁷

Greenwood’s city fathers did not take the boycott seriously at first, believing that this campaign would sputter and fall apart as the Christmas boycott had. However, with uptown stores suffering and seeing no evidence that African American resolve was weakening, on May 31 the city council decided to take legal action to halt the protest. City Attorney Hardy Lott rounded up sixty-one business owners and filed a motion in Chancery Court on their behalf seeking an injunction against the boycotters. The plaintiffs’ petition accused Father Nathaniel and eleven other individuals of “creating an atmosphere of fear and terror in the Greenwood Negro community, and to a degree in Greenwood’s white community.” It declared that the defendants had, “by force, violence, coercion, threats, abusive language, intimidation and other unlawful means prevented a great portion of Greenwood citizens, mostly Negro, from doing business with complainants.”⁷⁸

Judge William H. Bizzell sided with the merchants and issued a sweeping temporary injunction aimed at quashing the boycott. His order enjoined Father Nathaniel and his associates from engaging in any concerted activity in support of the boycott. Explicitly prohibited were:

Picketing or marching, or persuading or inducing any other person or persons to picket or march in any organized fashion whatsoever, with or without signs or placards ...

Loitering or congregating, or persuading any person or persons to loiter or congregate ...

⁷⁶ *Ibid.*, 71.

⁷⁷ “A Delta Discussion—Issue VI,” June 5, 1968, St. Francis Mission Archives.

⁷⁸ *A.G. Abide, et al. v. Nathaniel Machesky, et al.* Bill of Complaint, Chancery Court of Leflore County, Mississippi, June 5, 1968.

Stationing themselves or anyone else as a lookout or lookouts for the purpose of observing customers entering, leaving, shopping, or doing other business ...

Making or preparing or causing to be made or prepared a record of the names, automobile license plate numbers, or other identification of person or persons ...

Publishing, distributing, or announcing in any manner the name or names of persons who have entered or traded in ... the business establishments...

Threatening, intimidating, coercing, or using force or violence upon any person or persons⁷⁹

A hearing later that month in Judge Bizzell's courtroom provided the merchants an opportunity to present evidence supporting their allegations. A parade of witnesses recounted incidents where Movement backers were accused of using violence and intimidation. Elvie Orlansky, who operated a dry goods store on Carrollton Avenue, testified that pickets lined the sidewalk in front of his establishment "three or four abreast, singing and hollering." He told of seeing a black customer thrown to the ground by two demonstrators after making a purchase in his store.⁸⁰ Restaurant worker Ernestine Walker told of "mysterious night visitors" to her home who warned her not to testify in court. "Baby, we've got your number," she was told.⁸¹ Frank Gunter said that an unknown person threw a bottle through his living room window after he purchased wire screen at a hardware store being boycotted. "I don't want glass flying in my house and for that fear I didn't go downtown," he testified.⁸² Eddie Archie reported that he and his wife were confronted by boycotters after shopping at white-owned stores. "How would you like for something to happen to your family?" his wife was asked. Archie said two bottles filled with flammable liquids, either kerosene or diesel fuel, were thrown at his home.⁸³ The most serious allegation involved Macy Jones, an employee

⁷⁹ *A.G. Abide, et al. v. Nathaniel Machesky, et al.* Writ of Injunction, Chancery Court of Leflore County, Mississippi, June 5, 1968.

⁸⁰ *Greenwood Commonwealth*, June 13, 1968.

⁸¹ *Ibid.*

⁸² *Ibid.*

⁸³ *Ibid.*

of the Crystal Club restaurant, who was wounded in the shoulder by an unknown assailant one day after testifying in court. Although Jones could not identify her assailant, lawyers for the merchants implied that she was shot in reprisal for her testimony against the Movement.⁸⁴

Representing the defendants was Jonathan Shapiro, an attorney with the Lawyers' Committee for Civil Rights Under Law in Jackson, who sought to refute the charges of harassment, intimidation, and violent reprisals. When the hearing resumed on June 19 Father Nathaniel was the first defense witness. He testified for three hours explaining the reasons for the boycott, its objectives, and futile efforts to meet with city officials. Machesky unequivocally stated, "I have never condoned violence," and explained that the Movement sought peaceful and harmonious race relations. He also said "great emphasis was placed on the fact that violence was wrong ... from the very beginning and it was constantly repeated at meetings." He admitted that names of boycott violators had been read aloud at "one or two" mass meetings, but this practice was discontinued after the attempted arson at the Archie home.⁸⁵

Sociologist Charles M. Payne offered some confirmation for the merchants' charges of organized harassment. In his study of the Greenwood civil rights movement, Payne described a secret group called "Spirit" headed by a young man from Hattiesburg.

People who repeatedly violated the boycott might find that when they hung laundry out to dry it got thrown on the ground when they weren't looking. When they walked down the sidewalk with bags of groceries, someone might bump into them, spilling the groceries. People might have a brick thrown through their windshields.⁸⁶

Payne claimed that "at least one member of the [Movement's] board of directors knew about it [Spirit] and did not strongly disapprove."⁸⁷ In a 2010 interview, Reverend William Wallace provided indirect support for this claim: "I'm sure there were those who were outside of the Movement who probably did things we did not agree with ... I never knew

⁸⁴ *Greenwood Commonwealth*, June 17, 1968. Attorneys for the defendants contended that Jones and her boy friend had been having trouble with another man and this may have caused the incident.

⁸⁵ *Greenwood Commonwealth*, June 19, 1968.

⁸⁶ Payne, *I've Got the Light of Freedom*, 327.

⁸⁷ *Ibid.*

any of them.”⁸⁸ In his court testimony Father Nathaniel acknowledged hearing mention of a “Spirit Club,” but denied he was familiar or associated with it.⁸⁹ It seems that the Movement’s leaders adopted a “don’t ask, don’t tell” policy regarding Spirit. Emphasizing their dedication to non-violence in public statements, they never tried to discover who was responsible for violent incidents. In this way they maintained a tenuous union between moderate and militant elements in the black community.

On July 4 Judge Bizzell issued his opinion, again ruling in favor of the merchants; the terms of his original injunction remained in force. Members of the Greenwood Movement were ordered to refrain from picketing and “all related activities which substantially contribute to the climate of coercion and fear in this case.”⁹⁰ Father Nathaniel announced his intention to abide by the terms of the injunction while pursuing an appeal.

Judge Bizzell’s sweeping order failed to cool the boycotters’ dedication. Indeed, it seemed to have the opposite effect. Prior to the injunction the Movement was faltering; the number of pickets decreased; on some days only one or two patrolled downtown streets. After the injunction was issued, however, the black community responded with unity. Kathleen Feyen stated,

I remember the injunction being the best thing that ever happened to us ... [The injunction] put us in the courtroom and that courtroom was just packed every day of the hearings. We couldn’t have got that many folk on the street if we had given away free chickens. We didn’t have to picket. There wasn’t anybody going in those stores during the hearings.⁹¹

African American shoppers continued to honor the boycott. On July 13 Edmund Noel reported, “The merchants here say you could throw a grenade down Main Street and nobody would be hit. What they mean is, the Negro-inspired boycott against white merchants has just about sounded a financial knell on retail cash register bells ... a white Catholic priest has this town tied up in knots.”⁹² Instead of mass picketing,

⁸⁸ Wallace interview, 2010.

⁸⁹ *Greenwood Commonwealth*, June 19, 1968.

⁹⁰ *A.G. Abide et al. v Nathaniel Machesky et al.*, Opinion of Chancellor, Chancery Court, Leflore County, Mississippi, July 4, 1968.

⁹¹ Conway, “Mills of God,” 84.

⁹² *Jackson Daily News*, July 13, 1968.

Movement supporters walked the streets wearing t-shirts emblazoned with the “Greenwood Movement” to remind shoppers the boycott still was in force.⁹³

As the protest dragged on, Greenwood’s uptown merchants sought a solution to their problems. Alex Malouf, Jr., belonged to the Chamber of Commerce and headed the Retail Merchants Committee. The senior Maloufs were Lebanese Catholics who supported Father Nathaniel and his mission. Their twenty-six-year-old son knew and liked the forty-eight-year-old priest: “I was going out and having coffee with Nat [Father Nathaniel] in the mornings and visiting with him.” A group of merchants approached Malouf and said, “If you’re in charge of the Retail Committee and all the stores are going broke, it’s up to you to fix it.” He found two other businessmen willing to serve on a negotiating committee—drug store owner James “Jimmy” Hogue and Buddy Goodman, co-owner of Kantor’s department store. Malouf assured the other merchants he would not make any concessions without first gaining their approval. He then sought guidance from Hardy Lott. The former president of the Greenwood Citizens’ Council offered his succinct counsel: “Don’t meet. When you meet and go into discussions you have to compromise. We have nothing to compromise. We have nothing to give—nothing.”⁹⁴

Despite this advice, Malouf met with the Movement’s negotiating committee: “We agreed on a few things and some things we couldn’t agree on.” The first demand to be settled was the use of courtesy titles for African American customers. A second issue was better jobs for black employees. “In the stores that mostly had black customers, they wanted a few sales people,” Malouf recalled. This also was accepted. Hiring black policemen and firemen was more difficult since this could be accomplished only by the city government. Here the merchants sent a letter to the mayor and city council supporting this action.⁹⁵ Because city fathers refused to act on this recommendation, the boycott continued.

Father Nathaniel did not participate in these negotiations. The priest was sensitive to charges that a white man was preempting leadership

⁹³ Jake McGhee refused to abide by the injunction and was repeatedly arrested for picketing.

⁹⁴ Malouf interview. Lott had been head of the Greenwood Citizens Council chapter. He defended Byron de la Beckwith at two trials for the murder of Medgar Evers. Both trials ended in hung juries.

⁹⁵ *Ibid.*

of a black movement and avoided speaking for the Greenwood Movement. Whenever possible, he encouraged Reverend Wallace to appear on behalf of the Movement. Although the friar shared formal leadership with two black ministers, Greenwood whites saw Father Nathaniel as the boycott's main instigator. There was considerable justification for this belief. Father Nathaniel was the Movement's chief strategist and its most articulate publicist. His editorials in the *Center Light* gave eloquent voice to black grievances. Pamphlets and letters defending the boycott and setting forth the Movement's objectives bore the imprint of the former English teacher. In addition, he had access to the St. Francis Center, which served as the Movement's command post. Most important, his eighteen years of selfless service had won him the deep respect of all sectors of Greenwood's African American community.

In spring of 1969, although the boycott remained in force, attention shifted to the upcoming municipal election. Mayor Sampson announced he would seek a fourth four-year term. Sampson's opponent was Thurman Henry, a former mayor employed by the wealthy Billups family. His campaign slogan, "It's Time for a Change," suggested a willingness to depart from Sampson's hard-line policies. When asked by a *Center Light* reporter if he would hire a black police officer, Henry replied, "Yes, I would hire a competent man."⁹⁶ The incumbent responded with a full-page ad in the *Commonwealth* citing his success in maintaining law and order in the face of "determined efforts ... by revolutionary forces to create racial strife and riots."⁹⁷ While Henry did not openly solicit African American votes, on Election Day newly registered black voters made their preference clear. In white North Greenwood, Sampson outpolled Henry 1157 to 950. Mostly white West Greenwood gave the incumbent a smaller margin—741 to 689. But in heavily black East Greenwood Henry trounced Sampson by nearly five to one—1444 to 295.⁹⁸ The election results demonstrated the power of Greenwood's black electorate.

Father Nathaniel scheduled a meeting with the newly elected mayor. Before discussing pressing issues, Henry asked to pray together. The priest saw this as a sign that this city administration would break with the past.⁹⁹ On August 22, just six weeks after Henry was sworn

⁹⁶ March 21, 1969.

⁹⁷ *Greenwood Commonwealth*, May 12, 1969.

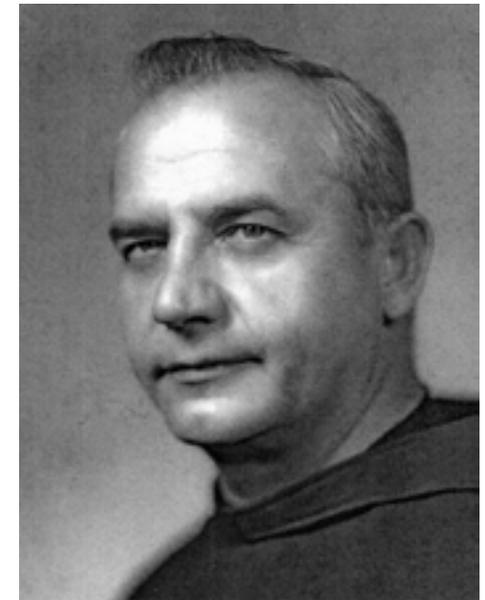
⁹⁸ *Greenwood Commonwealth*, May 14, 1969.

⁹⁹ Conway, "Mills of God," 88.

in, the *Center Light* reported that Ernest Smith was hired as Greenwood's first African American police officer.¹⁰⁰ Two weeks later another black man, Austin Staniel, joined the force.¹⁰¹

One major issue remained unresolved. For more than a year United States District Judge William C. Keady considered the Greenwood Movement's appeal of Bizzell's injunction. Finally, on November 20, 1969, Keady issued his ruling. He enjoined the merchants from "interfering with the First Amendment rights of the plaintiffs ... peacefully to picket, march, demonstrate, protest, distribute leaflets or otherwise publicize their grievances of racial discrimination and denial of equal rights." Keady admonished the boycotters not to demonstrate on private property, block public streets or sidewalks, make any threat, use vile or profane language, or damage others' property.¹⁰² The Movement celebrated Keady's order as a signal victory. In a *Center Light* editorial Father Nathaniel insisted the legal proceedings produced a worthy result: "a precedent has now been established for the whole country, making it clear that it is completely legal to conduct a boycott and to picket on public property."¹⁰³

With the injunction no longer hanging over their heads, the Movement's leaders announced, "As of December 10, 1969 we officially call off our present boycott." Reverend Wallace explained, "One of the purposes



Father Nathaniel Machesky, courtesy the author.

¹⁰⁰ *Center Light*, August 22, 1969.

¹⁰¹ *Ibid*, September 5, 1969.

¹⁰² *Machesky v. Bizzell*, U.S. District Court, Northern District of Mississippi, November 20, 1969. On June 13, 1968, the Mississippi legislature passed a law outlawing secondary boycotts. However, this "Charles Evers law" was not at issue in this lawsuit.

¹⁰³ *Ibid*, December 12, 1969.

of the boycott was to get dialogue. ... The present administration will listen and be responsive to the needs of the community."¹⁰⁴ The Greenwood Movement continued holding weekly meetings, however, attendance dwindled. The Leflore County Voters League, headed by David Jordan, soon emerged as the voice of Greenwood's African American citizens.

Father Nathaniel continued working in Greenwood for the next decade. The mission and school flourished, but many of the programs established in the 1960s ceased. The cooperative store and credit union disbanded. Federal funding for the STAR program was not renewed. The *Center Light* stopped publication. The Saint Francis Center remained open, but with reduced effectiveness as Miss Kate aged and several Center Ladies left Greenwood for other missions. Father Nathaniel withdrew from public affairs. Alex Malouf, Jr., observed, "Nathaniel became almost a recluse. After the boycott was over he wouldn't come downtown, didn't for years."¹⁰⁵ His rejection by Greenwood's white Catholics was a source of pain. "It hurt," he recalled years later. "My goodness, I had preached to these people. I heard their confessions. I prayed with them, went to funerals of their loved ones, took part in marriages of their loved ones. It hurt like crazy. I couldn't let them know, of course."¹⁰⁶ In 1981 Father Nathaniel was transferred to Charleston, Mississippi. After a series of strokes he left Mississippi for the Franciscan retirement home in Burlington, Wisconsin, where he died of cancer in 1995.

The most remarkable aspect of Father Nathaniel's story is his transformation from parish priest to civil rights leader. After years of shying away from open participation in racial protest, why did he take such a prominent role in the Greenwood Movement? Five factors must be considered.

First, there was a new bishop. In December 1967, Joseph B. Brunini succeeded the eighty-seven-year-old Gerow who had served as bishop of the Natchez-Jackson diocese since 1924. The new prelate was named auxiliary bishop in 1956 and gradually assumed many day-to-day administrative duties. According to Michael V. Namorato, "By 1961-62, Gerow, for all practical purposes, allowed Brunini to run the diocese in

¹⁰⁴ Ibid.

¹⁰⁵ Joe Atkins, "Memory of Machesky Lives in Greenwood," *Jackson Clarion-Ledger*, September 21, 1997.

¹⁰⁶ Tim Kalich, "Father Nathaniel's goodbye," *Greenwood Commonwealth*, April 11, 1993.

whatever way he wanted with only minimal supervision."¹⁰⁷ Although Brunini was born and raised in Vicksburg, he was more progressive than his predecessor, especially regarding the role of the church in the struggle for racial justice. Brunini was an opponent of racial discrimination who served as co-chair of the Mississippi Council of Interracial Cooperation during the 1950s. In 1968, when he learned of the petition to bar the Franciscans from Immaculate Heart of Mary parish, the bishop acted swiftly and decisively. In a letter to Immaculate Heart's pastor he said, "I have already spoken with Father Nathaniel expressing my full and complete support of his struggle for the social and economic rights of all people in Greenwood."¹⁰⁸

Undoubtedly influencing Brunini's progressive view was his participation in the Second Vatican Council in Rome from 1962 to 1965. The spirit of ecclesiastical renewal resulting from this conclave of Catholic bishops was a second factor shaping Father Nathaniel's emergence. The decrees issued by the council triggered wide-ranging changes within the Catholic Church, from replacing Latin with the vernacular as the language of the mass to modernizing nuns' attire. Most important for Catholic activists was a new atmosphere of constructive engagement with the secular world. The council's *Constitution on the Church in the Modern World* encouraged Catholics to focus their attention on the root causes of social problems. This led to a shift from traditional charitable works to addressing systemic causes of poverty and racism.¹⁰⁹ This emphasis meshed well with Father Nathaniel's growing impatience with institutionalized discrimination and his longstanding desire to foster self-sufficiency among his flock.

A third cause was the departure of SNCC workers from Greenwood. After the failure of the FDP's challenge at the 1964 Democratic Convention, the coalition of activists behind COFO and the FDP began to break apart. Many early SNCC staffers like Sam Block and Willie Peacock were burned out. Prolonged exposure to danger left them suffering from

¹⁰⁷ Michael V. Namorato, *The Catholic Church in Mississippi, 1911-1984: A History* (Westport, CT: Greenwood Press, 1998).

¹⁰⁸ Brunini to Reverend Walter Maloney, May 7, 1968. Archives of the Catholic Diocese of Jackson, Jackson, Mississippi.

¹⁰⁹ Robert L. Kinast, "Vatican Council II and American Catholics," in *The Encyclopedia of American Catholic History*, Michael Glazier and Thomas J. Shelley, eds., (Collegeville, MN: Liturgical Press, 1997), 1422-30.

symptoms resembling post-traumatic stress. Others were disillusioned with liberals in the Democratic Party and abandoned hope of reforming existing political structures. As SNCC's emphasis shifted toward Black Power, its remaining workers relocated to areas more receptive to their militant message. Stokely Carmichael, who had lived in Greenwood during Freedom Summer, moved to Lowndes County, Alabama, where he helped form an all-black political party more in keeping with SNCC's Black Power orientation.¹¹⁰ The leadership vacuum created when SNCC staffers left opened the door for more moderate leaders.

Fourth was the serious threat of violence from militant young blacks who rejected Martin Luther King's doctrine of love and creative suffering. Each summer since the 1965 Watts riot, American cities experienced urban revolts characterized by widespread looting and destruction. Small towns like Greenwood were not immune to the rising tide of black rage. Even before King's murder, many blacks concluded the time for non-violent protest was gone. Father Nathaniel and his fellow ministers realized that if they did not channel that frustration in a positive direction, all hell could break loose. Everything he had worked for—the church, school, and center—could easily go up in smoke.

The final reason can best be described as a crisis of conscience. For several years Father Nathaniel had observed the struggle for equal rights. He prayed that Greenwood's whites would come to their senses and begin addressing black grievances. In 1965 he offered a hopeful assessment of the prospects for racial progress: "once the freedom rides and large demonstrations were necessary, but that day is past."¹¹¹ By 1967 his optimistic outlook had vanished. Father Nathaniel became convinced that moral suasion and peaceful protest would never force concessions from Greenwood's white establishment. To a degree, he came to share Stokely Carmichael's analysis that white officials would not relinquish their monopoly of political power unless forced to do so. Although he never advocated violence to achieve the Movement's goals, he did not shy away from harnessing the power of black consumers in the struggle for equality. Years later he reflected on his decision to lead the boycott:

¹¹⁰ Hasan Kwame Jeffries, *Bloody Lowndes: Civil Rights and Black Power in Alabama's Black Belt* (New York: NYU Press), 2009.

¹¹¹ Geoffrey Link, "Christian Encounter in Greenwood, Miss.," *Sacred Heart Messenger*, August 1965, 31.

"You know, it [the boycott] was the only thing left to do. It was a question of doing what was right or leaving town."¹¹² He did not leave town.

¹¹² *Mississippi Today*, January 9, 1987.