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(Section from manuscript on Mississippi Movement, Civil Rights, 1960s, from perspective of a white Mississippian living and working in black community as a leader of Movement).

(Material on chapter on violence; non-violence; Black Power...)

I accepted the gun in the fall of 1966. School desegregation had started in rural Madison County. Only a few black children were involved; the father of one child was beaten by white men; bombing attempts on all the homes were anticipated. There was major trouble in other parts of the state. In Grenada a white mob had beaten many of the black children at the white school. Martin Luther King, Joan Baez, and others joined local blacks in protest marches. In the Delta night riders fired into the home of one black family whose daughter had desegregated the first grade. The black girl was injured by the gunfire--and lost the sight in one eye. For the first week of school in Madison County the black father and grandfather of one family stood guard with guns over their home all night, every night. One white Tougaloo teacher, my friend John Garner, answered their request for help and spent several nights with them.

On the weekend the father asked for more help. The grandfather was sick and the father exhausted. No one else at Tougaloo College, black or white, would help. Some black men who had earlier refused to support the nonviolent demonstrations claiming they, personally, rejected nonviolence, etc., now would not assist in this new way. So the appeal finally came to me, the advocate and teacher of nonviolence. I first used the excuse of Black Power to avoid the issue, saying this was no job for a white man. But when there was no one else I responded. I did not guard my own home with guns. But I could not refuse a man who needed help--especially since I (like John Garner) had encouraged local people to send children to the white school. So the two tired black men went to sleep--trusting their home, their lives, their family to two white Movement men.

John Garner accepted his responsibility in his usual thorough fashion. He spent many hours that week in the fields behind this house in target practice with a rifle.

I knew nothing about guns. So John took the rifle and gave me the shotgun when we got to the black home. Our black comrades laughed and joked that I might hit something the way and, at least, awaken the household. They had other guns at their bedsides. The mother had fixed a sweet potato pie and cold fried chicken for us to nibble on with hot coffee through the night. So John and I took our posts, one in front of the house, one in the rear. Frequently we circled the small wood frame house. I was alert to every night sound from the woods and fields surrounding us. A narrow gravel road led down past this farmhouse from a blacktop road in the distance. Any car turning this way could be heard--and probably any car would be a klan car. We waited.

Several hours past midnight a car approached. It stopped at the intersection. There were no lights on--an ominous sign. The car turned towards us, drove a little, then paused. There was no movement for several minutes. I clinched my shotgun. Then the car backed, turned, and drove away. I was furious. My target had escaped. I wanted to shoot. I realized I wanted them to come, that I wanted to kill my enemies. I was shaking. Every fear, every hostility, I had repressed for years had returned. I hated my enemies; I hated the men I was afraid of; I the hated the men I wanted to change whose society I wanted to change; I hated my white brothers. I wanted to kill. I needed to kill. I wanted total destruction, death.

As I realized more of my own thoughts I became afraid of myself. I began to judge myself, to despise myself. I wanted to run away--in my mind and in my body. It was still dark, several hours till dawn, and I could not flee. All I dared do was keep going and drink more coffee. I wanted to stop thinking--but couldn't. Finally the beauty and quietness of the Mississippi night, even this night, began to calm me, the same night that also masked such terror. My thoughts grew longer with a little more understanding of my situation, of myself, of my enemies--of the gun. I accepted myself--my hate, my fear, my confusion, and my ideals of love, peace, brotherhood, and nonviolence even my confused efforts to follow the teachings of Mahatma Gandhi and Jesus Christ.

It was right for me to have this gun protecting this black man and his family. That was his choice for his life. But for my own life, for that time. I understood that the gun was not right for me. It was too much power. My acceptance of even this violence led to almost uncontrollable hate, the denial of the good things I wanted to believe. A gun in the hands of other men may not be an evil thing. Many men are stronger than I. But for me the gun, violence, is too dangerous. I no longer have creative ideas or good will or love--things I want to believe also have power. With the gun, with an instrument of total violence, I am reduced to the level of my hate and have no greater power than the weapon in my hands. And my weapon takes the place of my faith. And the enemies under the white sheets of the Mississippi night or the star-spangled bunting of the American Empire have far greater power than I can ever have in such a contest, and, perhaps, far greater hate. Slowly the long night ended. The stars began to fade. The eastern horizon turned pale blue and pink. The sun was rising in the mists, from the direction of Bloody Kemper, Bloodier Neshoba, Standing Pine, Harmony, the remnants of the Choctaw Indian lands, the swamps of the Pearl River, and the great trees of the Natchez Trace. By the chicken coop the cock began to crow. The night was over. I do not know what I had denied. I do not know what I had discovered.