
The Sit-In Movement of 1960

Martin Oppenheimer

PREFACE BY DAVID J. GARROW

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Series Editor's Preface

Martin Oppenheimer's 1963 dissertation on the student sit-in movement of 1960 has long been an important resource and reference tool for scholarly students of the southern civil rights struggle, and I am very pleased that Carlson Publishing's series of volumes on *Martin Luther King, Jr., and the Civil Rights Movement* will now be able to make it available to a considerably wider audience.

As Oppenheimer himself notes in his 1989 preface, his disciplinary affiliation with sociology required that he organize and analyze his study of the sit-ins in ways that sometimes diverge from traditional historiography, but Oppenheimer's work still remains, over twenty-five years later, the richest and most detailed study, published or unpublished, that we yet have on what in retrospect was clearly the breakthrough year for the southern civil rights movement, 1960.

The greatest values of Oppenheimer's volume lay both in the very detailed and original account of the sit-ins own spread that is contained in sections D and E of part III and in the important and largely unique studies of ten different communities—Charlotte, Nashville, Atlanta, Jacksonville, Rock Hill (South Carolina), Columbia, Tallahassee, Montgomery, Orangeburg, and Lawrenceville (Virginia)—that are presented in part IV. The landmark initial events in Greensboro, North Carolina, have been nicely chronicled in William Chafe's *Civilities and Civil Rights* (Oxford University Press, 1980), but no latter-day comprehensive study of the south-wide sit-ins has yet supplanted Oppenheimer's almost contemporaneous work as a detailed and dependable record of how quickly this new manifestation of black student activism burgeoned all across the South. Both in tracking the chronological and geographic spread of the sit-ins, and in analyzing both the attitudes of the participants and the dynamics of their interactions with local white authorities, Oppenheimer makes an invaluable contribution to the overall historiography of the black freedom struggle in the South. When the

day comes that a truly comprehensive and broad-gauged history of the entire southern movement is prepared, Oppenheimer's volume will be a major building-block in such an effort; in the meantime all scholars and students with an interest in how the sit-ins of 1960 and their youthful sponsors sparked the crucial intensification of the southern struggle will find that *The Sit-In Movement of 1960* is the most valuable place to begin.

David J. Garrow

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What was considered sociology twenty-five years ago has become history. The history of the civil rights movement has recently become an object of fascination, part of a wider interest in all of the movements of the sixties. Unfortunately, the media often portray history as nothing but personalities and movements, nothing but arguments about style. This message must be overcome and supplanted with a sensibility that the present is derivative, and is in turn mutable, and that movements were, and are, about real issues.

The real issues of the sixties persist. In the case of the present series, the issue is one of racial conflict within the United States. An understanding of the persistence of the conflict and, hopefully, the development of sound strategies to come to terms with it, demands far more than a romanticized, Hollywood version of what the civil rights movement (and its opponents) were all about.

Social scientists know that generations and decades are socially-derived categories, and that "beginnings" are arbitrary. Still, the sit-ins of 1960 have come to be acknowledged by many as the opening event of "the movements of the sixties." In my view the sixties actually began on December 1, 1955 with the Montgomery Bus Boycott, and ended only in 1975 with the collapse of the Saigon regime. Be that as it may, it is hardly debatable that the sit-ins constituted a major breakthrough.

The sit-in movement activated masses of people, particularly college students, resulted in the integration of a range of public facilities in the South, and opened the way to the Freedom Rides, Mississippi Summer, Selma and many other events. Veterans of the black student movement have gone on to play major roles in politics and in the wider society. Many white Northern students who had been mobilized in support of the sit-ins and later civil rights work became active in the anti-war movement after 1965; they too have gone on to play important roles in other reform efforts. Many women participants became leaders in the feminist movement. Although no revolution (political, economic, racial, or psychic) has taken place, the face of American politics and society more generally has been unalterably changed