

THERE WAS A TREE IN STARKSVILLE...

In 1961, going 'back South' to form an interracial community meant facing a bitter—and bittersweet—history.

SOUTHWEST GEORGIA IS where Lee, Terrell, Dougherty, Schley, and Sumter counties rub up against each other in the Flint River basin, and where creeks with names like Kinchafoonee and Muckalee snake through and spill over, as the water heads south.

The face of the land when I got there was slow, small hills and fields of cotton, peanuts, and corn; turpentine mills and piney woods; the clay a red juice in rain, red dust in hard sun. This is where Otis Redding came from, and Bernice Johnson Reagon, founder of Sweet Honey in the Rock. It's where Jimmy Carter was raised, and where, during World War II, a white country preacher and his wife established Koinonia, an interracial, radical Christian farm.

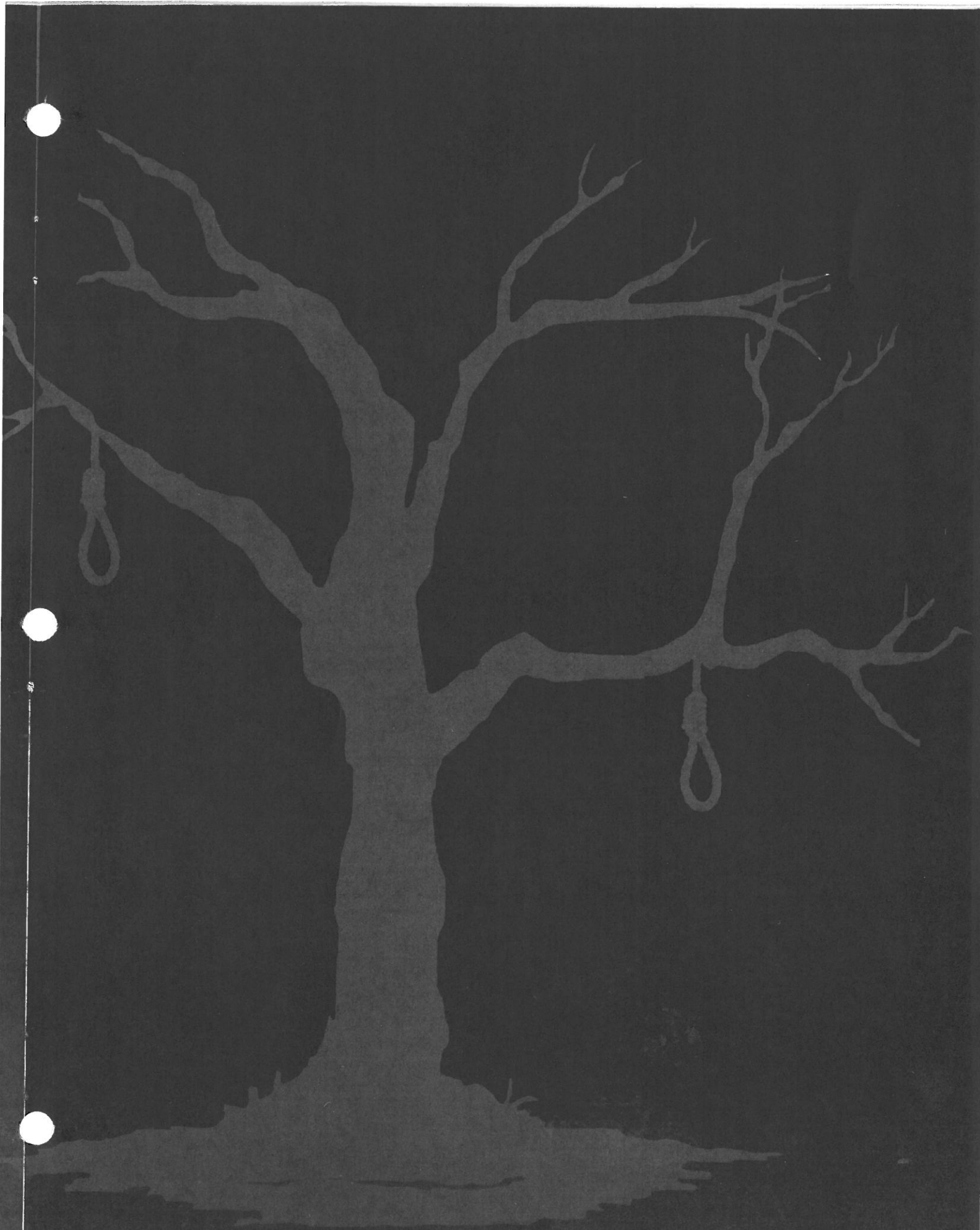
This was also the home of the Albany Movement in the early 1960—the first mass movement of the civil rights era to have desegregation of an entire community as its goal—and the starting ground of the international affordable-housing program Habitat for Humanity. And, many years before, it was where my great-grandmother, Mariah Grant, arrived from Florida—with the children she could keep—and settled, at the end of slavery, in a town called Leesburg.

My parents, Dock and Ella, were born there—and left. They left with most of my aunts and uncles, all of my older brothers and sisters, my maternal grandparents, and a generation of

my cousins. Almost everybody who could go, it seems, did go north: to Philadelphia, New York, Detroit, and, for most of my family, Chicago. I was born at the end of that journey. My sister Norma and I were the first of the Northern generation of Freeneys. And while cousins and friends from Georgia visited us throughout my Illinois childhood, none of my relatives went back South until the 1960s. I was the first to return.

My parents didn't talk to me about why they left Georgia. At least I don't remember much conversation about it. But the elders in the family were always protective of children, and I'm sure they must have had conversations and remembrances among themselves that the younger people were spared. It was not until I had joined the Mennonite Church, married, and decided with my new husband, Vincent, to go to Atlanta to work full-time in the freedom movement that my mother and father began to tell me some things. They were, understandably, fearful for my safety. The state I was returning to was the same one from which—35 years before—they had fled.

THERE WAS A tree, my mother said, in a place called Starksville, along a road where people passed daily going to and from their labors. It was a large tree, an old tree, and the branches spread crooked-wide in all directions. "They used to hang people there," Mom said. "They





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Author Rosemarie Freney Harding with Martin Luther King Jr. and others in Leesburg, Georgia. At right, a 1942 photo of members and friends of the interracial Koinonia community.

would hang a man there and then make all the Colored go and look. If you get down that way, ask somebody to show it to you." My father, too, warned me in his quiet ways. And perhaps my going South brought up more memories for him, because as he aged, he began to tell

his grandchildren about some of the horrors he had witnessed.

A few years before my parents left Georgia, a man and all three of his sons were strung up from different limbs of that tree in Starksville and shot—their bodies left to hang as gruesome and vicious warnings to others. That man and his children became the reason Daddy decided to leave. This he did tell me: "I wanted my sons to live."

IN SPITE OF all of this, I think my parents were proud of me, and even happy, that in some sense the family was now returning from a long exile. My daughter, Rachel, was born in Atlanta in December 1962. She and her brother, Jonathan, were two of Dock and Ella's last grandchildren, and the only ones raised in the South. When my father died, we found a calendar from 1962 on the wall of his basement workshop. All but its last page had been torn off and it hung permanently at the month his first Georgia-born grandchild came into the world.

Going South for me was thus, in some ways, a homecoming. Atlanta was a logical place for a movement-based project headquarters, a Southern city that viewed itself as more progressive than some others. We traveled throughout the region on behalf of the Mennonite Church and in liaison with organizations such as the Southern Christian Leadership Conference, the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee (SNCC), the Congress on Racial Equality, and the Fellowship of Reconciliation.

But there was something beyond the logic of an administrative decision that drew us to Atlanta. The campaigns and communities of southwest Georgia quickly emerged as some of our strongest movement connections. These

were connections that started forming even before we left Chicago. I met Clarence Jordan in 1961 when he came to speak at Woodlawn Mennonite Church. I was struck immediately by the soft cadences of his voice and his warm, country manner. He reminded me very much of my own father and uncles. The work of racial reconciliation and justice that Clarence and others were doing at Koinonia Farm seemed both exciting and profoundly important. Vincent and I kept in touch with the Koinonia community, and once we arrived in Atlanta, we made frequent visits to the farm in Americus, Georgia, for rest, reflection, and fellowship. Like Koinonia, we were trying to create a spiritually grounded, service-oriented, interracial community, and the place we founded—Mennonite House—was a kindred spirit to the Koinonia community.

Another important connection for us was the Albany Movement. In 1961-62, SNCC and other freedom movement organizations were invited to Albany, Georgia, to help mobilize a city-wide campaign to desegregate public facilities, register blacks to vote, and otherwise challenge the structures of white supremacy in the city and its environs. I did a lot of behind-the-scenes organizing. Vincent and I participated in many demonstrations, and we came to know members of that community very well. What I saw reminded me of my family in Chicago—from the abundant hospitality and the familiar comfort foods to the remarkably unassailed dignity of people struggling for their most basic democratic and human rights.

Finally, there was something about the land. I remember driving down the narrow unpaved roads toward Americus and Albany—brush and high grass on both sides, mist rising there in the early mornings. I tried to imagine what those roads might have been like when my Indian ancestors first made them, when my African ancestors walked and worked them, and when my father and uncles were building houses, courthouses, and train stations along them in Macon, Albany, and Leesburg. My father told me that he made bricks from the clay under these roads.

My relatives in Chicago, especially the older ones—my parents, aunts, and uncles, who had lived into adulthood in Georgia—shared something with the Southerners I was meeting now. In spite of its horrid and painful history, southwest Georgia (like the

VeteransHope.org photo

southeastern United States generally) has a sweetness. It is often vaunted and romanticized—and sometimes derided—as a conceit. But as I've experienced it, in the region itself, and in the lives of the exiled African Americans who raised me, it is true.

My older sister Mildred speaks admirably of our aunts, our mother's sisters, who worked as domestics in the houses and hotels of Chicago's elites and in the factories of the

something crafted that ultimately transcends and transforms the original defensive uses.

There were lessons, indirect perhaps, in the choices my parents made about telling stories of their lives down South. I think they were conscious of the impressions left by brutal memories, and they used reticence and discretion to point toward an alternative. The absence of a full reporting, in my childhood, of the Southern horrors was not so much because

my older brothers and sisters had gone out on their own. I remember one time when I was alone in the house with Mom and Dad. From my bedroom I overheard them in the kitchen talking about their times down South. Their voices were light and warm as they talked about the people with whom they had shared good times—laughing together at the remembrance of past joys. They joked between themselves about long-gone things.

I can't specifically remember anything they said, but I know that it gave me a feeling of connection with family members I had never known. Some had left the South years before my parents did—such as my mother's brothers, Tom and McFall, who went to Mexico, the Philippines, and Panama. And such as my father's uncle, who had settled in Liberia and raised a family there, although he returned to Leesburg when he was ill because he wanted to die at home.

I heard security in the delighted rising and diminishing of my parents' voices. They sat together at the kitchen table—maybe snapping beans together or eating Mama's hot rolls with coffee—and their mutual pleasure in reminiscence was like a soft and sturdy pillow under me. Somehow, knowing that they shared so much, that they had so much in common, so many warm confidences of family and friends and life before Chicago, was a kind of protection, another layer of relations wrapped around me like bunting.

When I went South, I took all my memories with me—the memories of violence and the things-too-terrible-to-talk-about, and the memories of the people who survived them. Especially the people who survived them, my family and so many others I knew, who had found a way, inside themselves and out, to live beautiful lives—anyhow. When I got to Albany and Macon and Americus and Leesburg in early 1961, I was met by other people, other Southerners, black and white, who had also found a way—and who were working hard to make that way wider. ■

Rosemarie Freeney Harding died in 2004 after a long life advocating for justice and democracy through the U.S. civil rights movement and around the world. Her daughter, Rachel E. Harding, an assistant professor at the University of Colorado in Denver, is writing a memoir about her mother, based on extensive interviews, from which this excerpt is taken.



city's industries. They carried themselves with so much grace and self-assurance. Often it was in their tone of voice. Not too high, as it might have been if one were upset. And not too low, as if one were angry. But a modulated, gentle way of speaking. A Southernness. Perhaps the tone originally developed from the mixture of African, European, and Native American pronunciations that guided the sounds of the early days of the colonial encounter. Or maybe it began as a marker of status—gentility as leisurely language. It seems, too, that—especially for black folk—there may have been something about the vocal timbre, the words chosen, the manner of speaking that was protective. During slavery and in the years of viciousness that followed, one's voice tone, one's decisions about how and what to say, could literally save one's life. So there is that too—the legacy of violence in the sweetness. Some people may think it is a bad thing to preserve a quality of voice reminiscent of subservience, of persecution. But if it is reminiscent of those things, it also expresses a human creativity in oppressive circumstances,

Mom and Dad wanted us to live in simple-minded obliviousness; rather, they wanted us always to hold a basic respect for other human beings—even for people who might victimize us. They wanted us to be able to develop our own spirits without undue prejudice, not to be so burdened by disdain that we couldn't grow our souls. I think they understood that the terror they went through—stark as it was—was not the last word in human experience, and that there are chords deeper and more resilient than racism can ever be, and they wanted to give us access there.

GOING “BACK” SOUTH, then, I carried the memories of family and friends who had lived there and left. The stories were in me, in an embodied, visceral way. Growing up among black Georgians, Mississippians, and Alabamans meant that I absorbed a sense of that which was horrific in the place they had gone away from. It also meant that I absorbed a sense of what was potentially healing from that same place.

As the youngest child, I lived at home after

Koinonia Farms archives