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White Actors in the Civil Rights Movement: Social Progressives in Americus, Georgia

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WHITE ACTORS IN THE CIVIL RIGHTS MOVEMENT:
SOCIAL PROGRESSIVES IN AMERICUS, GEORGIA

by

GARRET A. MOYE

(Under the Direction of Jonathan Bryant)

ABSTRACT

This research explicates the complexity of race relations between whites and blacks during the mid-twentieth century by using the story of Koinonia Farm (now Koinonia Partners) in Americus, Georgia. Founded in 1942, Koinonia actively practiced and promoted equality between all ethnicities and emerged as a vanguard for liberal policies over a decade before the Civil Rights Movement reached Sumter County. Notably, Koinonians effected this change while refusing to engage or align with either the white liberal movement or the Civil Rights Movement, electing to avoid politicization of their endeavors in hopes of inspiring what they felt to be a truer change in race relations.

INDEX WORDS: History thesis, Koinonia, Race relations, Civil Rights Movement, Americus, White actors

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SOCIAL PROGRESSIVES IN AMERICUS, GEORGIA

by

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CHAPTER 1

INTRODUCTION

The struggle for African Americans to secure their rights as full and equal citizens of the United States was a difficult one, impeded by myopic whites that employed whatever means available to ensure blacks remained inferior in, if not subjugated to, a white society. There was, however, a vital progressive minority of whites who supported, and participated in, the African-American struggle for equality. Examining the Civil Rights Movement in Americus, Georgia, during the 1950s and 1960s reveals the roles these whites played in weakening the segregationist bloc. More importantly, the area provides ample evidence of the necessity of such groups in rural areas of the Deep South where the “black burden” weighed heaviest.¹ Answering Martin Luther King, Jr.’s challenge to white Christians decades before he levied it, these whites began in the 1940s to effect change outside the judicial and legislative avenues and instead hypostatize a paradigm shift in race relations through dedicated example.²

Koinonia Farm (now Koinonia Partners) near Americus, Georgia, provides one of the best examples of this progressive-minded and overlooked group. A white-led, Christian, agrarian, commune, its members dedicated themselves to practicing unadulterated equality that ignored ethnicity and social-standing in attempt to create a community that mirrored the one espoused by the early Christians. Predating the Civil Rights Movement by over a decade, Koinonia began its unique challenging of the racial status quo in 1943 and, practicing pacifism

¹ Khalil Gibran Muhammad, *The Condemnation of Blackness: Race, Crime, and the Making of Modern Urban America* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2010), 324. Note that the text in quotation is not a direct quote from Muhammad’s work, but rather a summary of the paragraph quoted from that references the undue onus of criminality and inferiority endured by blacks in America.

² Martin Luther King, Jr., “Letter From a Birmingham Jail,” April 16, 1963, Stanford University, The Martin Luther King, Jr. Research and Education Institute, Featured Documents,

and parity, withstood local antipathy to promote the integrationist cause. This research endeavors to map the direct and indirect influence of Koinonia, both locally and nationally, as the attention its unique example drew resulted in an unexpected promulgation of its ideals.

It should be noted that the intention of this paper is not to present yet another white-savior narrative that cheapens the African-American effort in the Civil Rights Movement. Nor is it an attempt to obfuscate the role of whites in perpetuating deplorable legal and illegal reprisals against the blacks who dared probe the society that so abused them. Rather, this research is intended to continue the dismantling of the bloc history that still pervades the study of race relations in the twentieth century. In so doing, agency will be returned to the subset of progressive-minded Southern whites who are often eclipsed, and subsequently silenced, by their more vitriolic neighbors.

Following such rhetoric, David Chappell's *Inside Agitators: White Southerners in the Civil Rights Movement* is particularly valuable. Chappell argues for the existence of three distinct groups of whites during the Civil Rights Movement: "conscientious movement supporters," "opportunistic white moderates," and "rapid segregationists."³ The first group provided blacks with connections, information, and money in a society that was still decidedly white-run. The second competed with intransigent whites for leadership roles by offering peace-inducing options that competed with the inflammatory ones enacted by segregationist. Finally, the third group of whites in the South, and the best-known, were those who tenaciously and violently fought to preserve a society in which whites reigned supreme and blacks were kept in pseudo-slavery.

³ David Chappell, *Inside Agitators: White Southerners in the Civil Rights Movement* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1994), 1-3.

On the subject of Koinonia itself, there are several noteworthy works done by historians in recent decades. Of them, Tracy E. K'Meyer's *Interracialism and Christian Community in the Postwar South: The Story of Koinonia Farm* stands as the inimitably exhaustive narrative. K'Meyer adroitly examines what shaped and encouraged Koinonia's incarnation, its subsequent challenges, and the commune's eventual transformation. Focusing on how Koinonians were driven to develop an alternate option to the society they lived in because of their Christian belief system, K'Meyer provides readers keen insight into the role of religion in driving bands of progressives to behave in the manner that they did.

Andrew S. Chancey has similarly spent countless hours researching and delineating the story of Koinonia. His works concentrate on contextualizing Koinonia within the larger historical narrative of the South to examine what nuances it reveals about the region. In particular, Chancey uses Koinonia to elucidate the subtle shifts in the religious sphere and social arena that served as catalysts for the slowly transforming South.

Numerous other historians have devoted anywhere from a few sentences to several pages to Koinonia, but, with the exception of one, do not bear naming outside of footnotes. Stephen Tuck's *Beyond Atlanta: The Struggle for Racial Equality in Georgia, 1940-1980*, is an invaluable scholarship for contextualizing Koinonia within the Civil Rights Movement. Mapping the efforts of the NAACP, SNCC, CORE, and other similar groups, Tuck reveals the importance of Koinonia in the successes of the SNCC led Southwest Georgia Project in Sumter County.

Because of the nature of this research, each chapter is driven by a thematic organization. However, within each chapter the upmost attempt has been made to implement chronological order to ensure the greatest accuracy and ease of understanding. Thus, readers will find some

recurring events between the chapters, but will see them examined through different lenses in each occurrence.

Chapter one serves as a foundational synopsis of Koinonia, establishing a generalized knowledge of the farm from 1942-1956. It begins with a brief history of Clarence Jordan, the founder of Koinonia, to ensure accuracy while examining the intended purpose of the stigmatized experiment, and concludes with the stirring of local animosity against the commune. In beginning this research in such a manner the attempt is made to prevent confusion in chapters two and three by establishing a comprehensive understanding of Koinonia, and its purpose.

Chapter two examines Koinonia from the perspective of the work — referred to in this paper as ministry in respect to the farm's religious undertones — it did in Sumter County and abroad. Seeking to highlight the impact forward-thinking whites had in their regions, Koinonia is held in comparison to the NAACP and SNCC to compare the effectiveness of the approaches each side espoused. Otherwise stated, Koinonia's grassroots methodology is contrasted with the top-down one espoused by organizations like those mentioned to survey the change and help each proffered to blacks in the area during the Civil Rights Movement. Of particular interest in this section is the role Koinonia played at the onset of the Americus Movement, as well as their role in aiding blacks after it was concluded.

Chapter three explores the response to Koinonia as another indicator of the influential role it played as a hub for social progressives. Beginning with the earliest incurring of hostilities, and continuing until the end of the economic sanctions enacted against the commune by locals, the focus throughout is the severity of responses to the group. In this chapter the argument is made that such a response reveals a feeling of betrayal on the part of the antagonists, and inherently points to the importance of Koinonia's actions. As Koinonia attacked the racial status-

quo from inside the white community, its neighbors rapidly shifted from stunned witnesses to hostile opponents.

CHAPTER 2

CLARENCE JORDAN AND THE GREAT EXPERIMENT

The South has long been a maelstrom of conflicting ideologies, and while it's "not quite a nation within a nation" it is certainly different enough from the rest of America to constitute it as "another land."⁴ It is not uncommon to hear Southerners demand a felony charge for those that mistreat the national flag, then, in the same breath, proudly declare their preparedness for the perpetually impending second Civil War. Personal freedoms and rights are societal cornerstones for denizens of the region, and the slightest infringement, whether real or imagined, on them provokes instant recalcitrance. This aspect of the Southern lifestyle manifested itself most clearly immediately before, and during, the Civil War, and simultaneously revealed the darker nature of Southern tradition: the egregious demarcation of freedom along a color line.⁵ Nearly a century after the Union defeated the Confederate secessionists, African Americans had yet to achieve their rightful status as equal citizens, and those in the south were at the mercy of Jim Crow — a system trapping non-whites in indigence. Clarence Jordan, as a child and young adult, witnessed firsthand the suffering of blacks forced to endure this new type of slavery, and framed his life around the experiences.

Born in Talbotton, Georgia, July of 1912, Clarence was the middle child of James and Maude Jordan's eventual seven. The area, like most of Georgia, suffered from drought and poor land management that kept its white residents struggling to pull ahead and its black populace in

⁴ W.J. Cash, *The Mind of the South* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, Inc. 1941), vii-viii, 134.

⁵ It is not the author's intention to insinuate that this shameful practice has been fully rectified. While there has been great progress in the last sixty years for minority rights, discrimination is still very much existent in the South and beyond.

perpetual poverty.⁶ While their neighbors struggled to endure, the Jordans enjoyed a more affluent lifestyle allowed by Clarence's father, who owned both the local bank and a general store.⁷ Embodying the idyllic, southern family model, the Jordans were regulars in the local Baptist church, active in their community, and unquestioning participants of the systematized racism that enjoined separation of ethnic blocs, except where work and communal areas necessitated cordial interaction, on its populace.⁸

Clarence, conversely, “saw things differently” and was tenaciously inquisitive, especially regarding race relations between whites and blacks — a trait that his siblings later recounted with begrudging admiration.⁹ The proximity of the county jail, located a short walk from the Jordan household, played a pivotal role in directing his penchant for evaluating what myriad merely accepted.¹⁰ Here, Clarence (hereafter referred to as Jordan) was exposed from an early age to the reprehensibly excessive sentencing and punishing of African Americans, many for infractions that were trivial or prompted by the need to survive. These experiences incited within him a “great conflict,” one that “derailed him at an early age from the mainline of tradition” and eventually led him to challenge the very fabric of southernism as he addressed discrepancies in the Christianity of the South.¹¹

⁶ Koinonia Partners Tape Collection (hereafter KP TC), no.CJ56, “Clarence Jordan Tells the Koinonia Story.”

⁷ Charles Marsh, *The Beloved Community: How Faith Shapes Social Justice, From the Civil Rights Movement to Today* (New York: Basic Books, 2005), 57-8.

⁸ KP TC, no. CJ58D, Interview with Frank, George, and Lillian Jordan.

⁹ *Ibid.*

¹⁰ Ann M. Trousdale, *Cotton Patch Rebel: The Story of Clarence Jordan* (Eugene: Resource Publication, 2015), 8-9;

¹¹ KP TC, no.CJ56, “Clarence Jordan Tells the Koinonia Story;” Dallas Lee, *The Cotton Patch Evidence* (New York: Harper & Row Publishers, 1971), 8-9.

This equivocal dissatisfaction with societal norms provided the requisite impetus for Jordan to find his direction in life. He traced the incarceration issue in the area to poor farmers, whose lack of understanding and resources left them with little to no chance of succeeding. Armed with this knowledge, Jordan changed his focus from the pursuit of a law degree to the pursuit of one in agrarian science, believing the latter to be a more practical solution to the problem. As his time at the University of Georgia in Athens was coming to an end, he felt led to pursue a formal education in theology. This latter decision was based on Jordan's belief that "African Americans need more than hybrid seeds and new fertilizers," and on his proclaimed desire to "root myself firmly in the teachings of Jesus."¹²

His experiences at the University of Georgia, and later at the Southern Baptist Theological Seminary, combined with his childhood experiences, encouraged Jordan to practice a radical approach to race relations. Rather than seeking to bridge the gap through political or legislative avenues, Jordan espoused economic reform and example as the solution to the South's racial issues. In 1942, as droves of southerners were volunteering for the second World War, Jordan, clinging to religion and reform, embraced pacifism and "stepped counter to virtually all that the South was or ever had been" to attempt his great experiment in race relations.¹³

The implicit and obvious tolls an undertaking of the magnitude Jordan was planning necessitated companionship with likeminded individuals that could serve as a sort of bulwark in what was sure to become a hostile environment. Walt N. Johnson unintentionally provided just

¹² Tracy E. K'Meyer, *Interracialism and Christian Community in the Postwar South: The Story of Koinonia Farm* (Charlottesville: University Press of Virginia, 1997), 29; KPTC, no.CJ56, "Clarence Jordan Tells the Koinonia Story."

¹³ Lee, *Cotton Patch Evidence*, 4-5, 13-14. It is worth noting here that Koinonia was not Clarence's first attempt at a Christian commune. There was an earlier, smaller, and failed, attempt in Louisville during his time in Kentucky, but for the purpose of this paper it has been removed from the larger discussion.

such a person through his self-published newsletter that was composed of, among other things, letters written to him from ministers and missionaries. Skimming the letters in the summer of 1941, Jordan was drawn to one written by Martin England that entreated Christians to live more sincere godly lives. Among other things, the missionary had written to Johnson to share his conviction that the easiest way to promote harmony was to find:

“Christian employees and employers, whites and Negroes, farmers and merchants, illiterate and school teachers, who were willing to enter into fellowship to make a test of the power of the spirit of God in eliminating the natural and artificial barriers that exist now”

Jordan saw in the message a kindred spirit that was wishing for the very thing he was attempting to create, and shortly thereafter made England his partner and unofficial co-founder of Koinonia.¹⁴

Martin England, and his wife Mabel, brought to the partnership a needed level of experience learned through their years serving as missionaries in Burma. On leave from the nation due to mounting hostilities incited by the World War II, the Englands were looking for something they could invest themselves in as they waited to return. The Jordans provided them exactly that. England and Jordan devoted long hours to hashing-out the finer details of the proposed project, and through their concerted efforts hypostatized the dream of Koinonia. The two most important facets of the experiment were its foundational tenets and its location. While the significance of the former is self-explanatory, as they would determine what direction the commune would go, the importance of the latter cannot be understated for its role in influencing the success and impact of Koinonia.

¹⁴ Andrew S. Chancey, “Restructuring Southern Society: The Radical Vision of Koinonia Farm,” (MA Thesis, University of Georgia, 1990), 13-16; Lee, *Cotton Patch Evidence*, 27-29.

Jordan required that all members, potential or permanent, of Koinonia prescribe to four precepts to frame their actions and lives around: “equality of believers, economic and otherwise,” collectivization of goods and “[re]distribution by need,” that “all persons are children of God,” and pacifism with “active good-will.” Intertwined as they were, the tenets required Koinonians to forgo individualistic goals and abjure personal property in the pursuit of unity, while embodying the love and acceptance enjoined by Christ to His followers. Each of the principals were designed to allow Koinonia to accomplish three goals: “teach better agricultural techniques to African-American farmers.... minister to the spiritual needs of their black neighbors, and to live in community.”¹⁵

In respect to location, there were numerous considerations to weigh before one could be chosen, ranging from the black-white demographics to the types of soil on the property, and at each site a careful evaluation was taken to ensure that Koinonia was founded in a “typical” Southern area. Initially, the pair “chose Chambers and Barbour Counties in Alabama” as their destination, feeling the deplorable race relations in the area, coupled with the poverty and spiritual need of local African Americans, would provide an ample testing ground for Koinonia to flourish in.¹⁶ However, Jordan and England were unable to find any such promised land, and were accordingly forced to broaden their self-imposed geographic parameters to include other locations.

Even with the less exclusive bounds the men continued to experience similar results and, disheartened by the lack of success, decided a hiatus was due to recharge and refocus. During the respite, in the summer of 1942, Jordan traveled southwest for a much needed visit with his

¹⁵ KA AP, no. Ev) Race + Race Relations; Civil Rights, Ordeal by Bullets, May, 1957; K’Meyer, *Interracialism and Christianity*, 46.

¹⁶ K’Meyer, *Interracialism and Christianity*, 39.

family, and, while there, enjoyed an unexpected surprise. Frank, one of his brothers, was working as a land appraiser for the region and had recently seen some land in the nearby Sumter County that he felt perfectly satisfied each of the prerequisites Jordan and England set forth.¹⁷ With “100 acres in cultivation, 100 acres in forest, and 200 acres in pasture” the farm, Jordan declared, offered “every opportunity for the development of the project.”¹⁸

Sumter County boasted of 24,502 denizens in 1940, with 13,347 of the number claiming status as farmers — this latter number including 9,349 agrarian-based blacks.¹⁹ The region as a whole had a “black-to-white ratio [of] more than 2:1,” with many local African Americans living as sharecroppers, or on self-owned farmland, that was nutrient depleted and barren.²⁰ Its county-seat and largest city, Americus, approximately eight miles from the land that Jordan and England chose to found Koinonia on, housed 9,281 by itself. By sheer size Americus allowed “the emergence of an indigenous group of black leaders independent from white economic control,” though reticence should be exercised in assuming this quasi-cabal represented anything more than a select, lucky, few African Americans in the area.²¹ While there were economically independent blacks in the city, the supermajority were rural-based and in virtual penury at the hands of Jim Crow.

Having found the land, the next phase was to raise the funds for the down payment needed to secure its ownership. This step proved much less frustrating, as Jordan’s and

¹⁷ *Ibid.*, 39.

¹⁸ Koinonia Partners Archived Papers (hereafter KP AP), no. 2 Aiii)a Clarence Jordan, Letter dated December, 1942.

¹⁹ United States Census, Sixteenth Census, 1940, Population, Vol. II, Part 2, Table 21, 21; Table 26, 296; Table 27, 306, Table 30, 358.

²⁰ K’Meyer, *Interracialism and Christianity*, 40.

²¹ Stephen Tuck, *Beyond Atlanta: The Struggle for Racial Equality in Georgia, 1940-1980* (Athens: The University of Georgia Press, 2001), 177.

England's travels had put them both in contact with myriad people who had promised their fiscal and spiritual support should they ever be called on. The pair drafted a brochure to send to all of their friends, family, and associates, asking for funds to pay the down payment, and received the aid shortly thereafter. Arthur Steilburg, a board member of the Union Gospel Mission who had spent considerable time with Jordan during the latter's ministry in Louisville, had been "attracted by [Jordan's] utter sincerity and his idealism" and promised years before to assist Jordan wherever possible with his future ministries.²² Receiving the request for money from Jordan and England, Steilburg promptly provided a check for the entirety of the down payment on the land — and continued to cover "more than half of the \$11,000 purchase price."²³

The land found and secured, Jordan's chimera was brought to reality as he and England began the arduous task of reifying Koinonia. Arriving in November of 1942, the pair started the process by planting crops and trees, and restoring the "old sheet-metal barn... tool shed... [and] ancient four-room farmhouse" to usable conditions.²⁴ Nevertheless, progress on the farm was hampered with World War II exacerbating complications as war-time restrictions on civilian expenditures made "it hard to get materials and building permits."²⁵ In fact, the restrictions were such that Jordan and England were forced to brave the winter conditions in ramshackle housing alone, not able to provide adequate housing for their wives and children until April due to delays on materials and permits.²⁶

Jordan refused to allow progress to be immobilized by aforementioned restrictions, and, with England, endeavored to firmly establish Koinonia as quickly as possible. In a letter written

²² Lee, *Cotton Patch*, 30-31.

²³ K'Meyer, *Interracialism and Christianity*, 40-41; Lee, *Cotton Patch*, 41

²⁴ Lee, *Cotton Patch*, 35.

²⁵ K'Meyer, *Interracialism and Christianity*, 43.

²⁶ Lee, *Cotton Patch*, 36.

to friends, associates, and family — in hopes of securing further provisions — Jordan described how he and England went so far as to “hitch each other to the plow” to harrow the land in preparation for planting crops.²⁷ Neighbors in the community were understandably bemused at the spectacle of two preachers attempting to cultivate a self-sustaining farm in the middle of winter, but lent support and guidance per the entreats of Jordan and England. Jordan recognized that, in asking for help, the men were securing their place in the community early-on by forging relationships that would allow them to “in time share with them our convictions about the brotherhood of all men... love... and Christian communal living.”²⁸

Try as he might to foster good-will, Jordan could not mask the fact that Koinonia stood in diametric opposition to all that was or had been Southern. Seeds of discord were planted almost as soon as he and England began the communal experiment, and were regularly exacerbated by the displays of unadulterated equality at the farm. Jordan and England called upon the Johnsons, a family residing on the property, Dempsey, a sharecropper trapped by debts, and G.D. to help them get Koinonia ready for members outside of their family-groups to join.²⁹ What proved unusual about this was not that each of the mentioned workers were African American, or even necessarily that they were paid “white wages,” though this was a contentious point, but that they were treated as equals. Where white neighbors could overlook, at least temporarily, blacks being paid wages that a white worker would expect, the sight of Jordan and England allowing these men to eat alongside them, at the same table and out of the same pot, was a reprehensible slight against Southern tradition. The Klu Klux Klan (KKK) made their first visits to Koinonia because

²⁷ KP AP, no. 2 Aiii)a) Clarence Jordan, Letter dated December, 1942.

²⁸ Ibid; Notebook, November 13, 1942, Clarence Leonard Jordan Manuscript Collection (hereafter CLJ MC); Jordan, “The Koinonia Story,” CLJ MC 756:10:9.

²⁹ Lee, *Cotton Patch*, 37; K’Meyer, *Interracialism and Christianity*, 43; Charles S. O’Connor, “A Rural Georgia Tragedy: Koinonia in the 1950s,” (MA Thesis, University of Georgia, 2001), 23-24.

of this, and, though Jordan's and England's poise defused the situations, the ministers were reminded just how quickly intimations of unrest could transform into open hostility when racial paradigms were challenged.³⁰

Notwithstanding the aforementioned, Koinonia experienced rapid growth due to Jordan's and England's diligence to outreach ministry in the local community, as well as abroad in college campuses and churches. The pair received numerous invitations to speak at churches, in Sumter County and beyond, and used the opportunities to share their beliefs whenever possible. England, especially, enjoyed a lively ministry in local churches, where his reputation as a missionary ensured he was invited to speak on a regular basis.³¹ Jordan likewise experienced a successful local ministry, but his real contribution was the net he cast travelling to college campuses and churches to deliver speeches, sermons, and Bible-studies. At these engagements he enthralled those listening with his sincerity and devotion to following what he felt the Bible enjoined upon all Christians, drawing both support and members to Koinonia as he did so.³² Together, the men steadily grew Koinonians membership before the farm experienced its first anniversary.³³

It was primarily white college students that became the first Koinonians, though there were African Americans that were closely associated with the farm, if not members themselves. A symptom of the racism thriving in the south, African American men and women were hesitant to join Koinonia initially for fear that its members would take advantage of them or that harsh

³⁰ Lee, *Cotton Patch*, 37-40.

³¹ *Americus Times-Recorder* (hereafter ATR), "Dr. Martin England Addresses Chapel," February 12, 1943, 1; ATR, "Rev. England Will Teach Plains Class," February 19, 1943, 4; ATR, "Lectures Continue at Central Baptist," March 10, 1943, 1; ATR, "Brotherhood to hear Rev. Martin England," April 10, 1943, 1; ATR, "Dr. Martin to Lecture at Rehoboth," April 15, 1943, 1.

³² KP AP, no. 2 Aiii)a) Clarence Jordan, Letter dated July 25, 1991 from Sarah M. Owen; K'Meyer, *Interracialism and Christianity*, 43-44.

³³ K'Meyer, *Interracialism and Christianity*, 44-46; Lee, *Cotton Patch*, 45-47.

reprisals might be enacted against them from whites outside of the commune. From 1942-1948 the black population was primarily comprised of the families of Joe Johnson, Jaspers Johnson, Bo Johnson, and Jessie Engram — though others, like Dempsey and G.D., visited and stayed for short periods on the farm.³⁴ However, those associated with the farm were as likely to live as quasi-sharecroppers or distant supporters than as full members alongside their white counterparts.

The lack of large numbers of black members at Koinonia mentioned above stemmed from two intertwined rationales founded on years of experience in the African-American community. There was an unmistakable, and justifiable, distrust of whites throughout most of the South because of mistreatment, deception, and violence experienced at their hands. More than fifty years of sharecropping, apprenticeships, voting laws, and general disenfranchisement ensured that, no matter how sincere the altruism, blacks predominantly preferred to live in designated “negro areas” for the safety they offered. Secondly, though not of lesser importance, was the reclassification of membership at Koinonia.

Necessitated by the large influx of visitors and growth in number between 1949 and 1952 — there were approximately 40 full-members, and one to two dozen visitors/residents at any point during this period — a meeting was due to define what exactly membership was.³⁵ Up to this point, visitors to the farm had been treated as equals no matter the length of their stay. They were given the choice as to whether or not they would abnegate their belongings, how much they would work to contribute to the experiment, and equal access to the community funds. Consequently, the meeting better delineated the parameters for becoming a full-member, and

³⁴ Ibid., 65; Lee, *Cotton Patch*, 46-48; KA AP, Farm Pamphlet, 1944; O’Conner, “A Rural Georgia Tragedy,” 27-28.

³⁵ Lee, *Cotton Patch*, 91

established a multi-step process for reaching such a rank.³⁶ The final stage proved the most challenging for blacks, as it called for the complete relinquishment of personal goods and goals to promote unity and equality amongst members. For many African-American families, the thought of relinquishing possessions they really had only just began accumulating was too foreign a concept that was exacerbated by the fact that the recipients of said goods was a predominately white group.

That Koinonia was promoting interracial fellowship outside traditional parameters was not missed by white residents in the surrounding area. Former President Jimmy Carter provides insight into the mindset of the majority of whites in Sumter County as he describes the race relations he experienced as a boy growing up, approximately ten miles west of Americus, in Plains, GA:

“Except as employees on the job, patients of doctors, customers at the business establishments, or when arrested and tried for some crime by city officials, the black and white citizens in town were not even acquainted with each other.”³⁷

Indeed, until 1954, the majority of blacks and whites in the region seemed suspended in a pseudo peaceful coexistence of melanin-based demarcation built on blocs that rarely, if ever, allowed overlap. Koinonia, at its incarnation, became the bridge between these spheres, and its members’ ministry in black communities inherently circulated ideals that contradicted the regional stratification. Koinonians found that warm-welcomes and support changed to hate-mongering and challenge as they continued in their mission, occurring with a speed and vigor that proved disappointingly disheartening.

³⁶ Ibid., 47-48, 67-72.

³⁷ Jimmy Carter, *An Hour Before Daylight: Memories of a Rural Boyhood* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 2001), 159.

Rehoboth Baptist Church provides one of the earliest examples of this. The Jordans and Englands joined Rehoboth shortly after stabilizing operations and, finding the church agreeable, in subsequent years encouraged other Koinonians to emulate their example. Both families, as well as the members that obliged to their suggestion, played pivotal roles at Rehoboth through leading Bible studies, small groups, and even preaching revivals.³⁸ The decision to join the nearby church allowed Koinonians to continue their quest of grassroots-infiltration into the local community, with participation normalizing³⁹ Koinonians and giving them another access point from which their ideologies could be disseminated.

While there were predominately affable relations between members of Rehoboth and Koinonians, friction was present and exacerbated by the egalitarianism practiced by the latter group. A series of incidents in the late 1940s proved too much for most of Rehoboth's congregation to overlook, and culminated in the untimely excommunication of all those associated with Koinonia. The first of these occurred in 1947, when Willie Pugh took two black girls associated with the commune to Americus to buy clothes. After finishing their chore, Pugh took the girls to get ice cream and held their hands as she walked them back to the truck — an egregious spectacle for the Rehoboth deacon that witnessed the act. The more serious affront, Pugh observed conversing with Bo Johnson in a field late in the evening by their neighbor, Robert Hamilton, not only drew the ire of Rehoboth members, but whites all over Sumter County. Despite explanations that the interaction was the result of a shift change caused by

³⁸ Henlee H. Barnette, *Clarence Jordan: Turning Dreams into Deeds* (New York: Smyth & Helwys, 1992), 62-70; K'Meyer, *Interracialism and Christianity*, 59.

³⁹ Normalizing is used here to refer to the then predominant belief that attending church was a vital part of the regimen for “true” Protestants. Those absent from church on Sundays bore a stigmatization that was difficult, if at possible, to overcome. Jordan criticized the church — in his sermons, speeches, and letters — for its lack of involvement in redressing racial paradigms, but was well aware of the risk of not having a, to use a Christian colloquialism, “church home” in the South.

Koinonia attempting to prepare fields for the coming harvest, rumors continued to spread of a possible carnal relationship between the two. The latter debacle compelled Johnson to leave the area until hostilities subsided, and earned Koinonia open condemnation for their “flagrant” displays of interracialism.⁴⁰

The above nearly caused Koinonians to be expelled from Rehoboth, but the pastor (soon-to-be-replaced Jesse Bell) managed to pacify the irate deacons and convince them to give Koinonia another chance. However, it was not long after this that Harry Atkinson, a long-time member of Koinonia, aggravated the still sore relationship by inviting “a black chauffeur of one of Rehoboth’s members” to join his Sunday school class.⁴¹ The enraged church annulled Atkinson’s membership, strongly suggested that the other Koinonians withdraw theirs, and barred anyone affiliated with the farm from “hold[ing] any office or place of responsibility in the church.”⁴²

The flash-point, and final straw, was provided by Jordan in 1950 when he invited a visiting “agricultural student from India who was studying at Florida State University” to attend church with him.⁴³ The student’s “dark skin led some to believe that he was a Negro” that the Koinonians were attempting to sneak in under the guise of being an Indian, and the resulting icy reception ended with the pastor “refus[ing] to shake hands with the young man” as he was leaving.⁴⁴ Jordan received a letter from Pastor Ira Faglier after the incident stating that Rehoboth

⁴⁰ Andrew S. Chancey, “Race, Religion, and Reform: Koinonia’s Challenge to Southern Society, 1942-1992” (Ph.D. dissertation, University of Florida, 1998), 75-77.

⁴¹ O’Connor, “A Rural Georgia Tragedy,” 30.

⁴² KP AP, no. Ev) Race + Relations; Civil Rights, Unlabeled Record of Events with Rehoboth Baptist Church.

⁴³ Lee, *Cotton Patch*, 75-76.

⁴⁴ KP AP, no. Ev) Race + Relations; Civil Rights, Unlabeled Record of Events with Rehoboth Baptist Church.

had decided to convene a meeting to sever relations with Koinonia “because of our differences in opinion on the race question.”⁴⁵ Condemning Koinonia for brining “people of other races in the services,” “constantly visit[ing] negro churches,” and “holding services where both whites and colored attend together,” Rehoboth Baptist Church officially abrogated membership and relations with Koinonia August 13, 1950.⁴⁶

While seemingly inconsequential, the importance of this decision cannot be overstated for the effect it had on the commune and the surrounding area. It marked the first decided shift away from Koinonia, as a whole, in Americus and the rest of Sumter County. Regular church involvement was still a societal more in the south, and as such Rehoboth had been Koinonia’s vital, albeit vestigial, root for destigmatization. Excommunication from the church conveyed to other whites that there was something deeply wrong with the Koinonians for them to be rejected from a place of (purported) love and acceptance. This mentality was only exacerbated as other churches in the area continued the practice of denying membership to the Koinonians who attempted to find more welcoming congregations, and cemented in the minds of all that those from the farm were unwelcome “aliens” to the region.⁴⁷

With one of the South’s most influential institutions shunning them, Koinonia’s ministry seemed at an end less than a decade after it began. Jordan refused to acquiesce so easily though, and wrote to the *Christian Century* after the expulsion to share his disbelief that a Southern Baptist church would expel white members, while the farm newsletter assured friends that

⁴⁵ KP AP, no. Ev) Race + Relations; Civil Rights, Letter from Rehoboth Baptist Church, August 9, 1950.

⁴⁶ KP AP, no. Ev) Race + Relations; Civil Rights, Recommendations of the Board of Deacons of the Rehoboth Baptist Church, August 13, 1950; “Relationship with Community Churches,” CLH MC 2340:31; Lee, *Cotton Patch*, 76-81.

⁴⁷ *Ibid.*, 81

Koinonia remained “whole-heartedly committed to complete brotherhood.”⁴⁸ Tenaciously entrenching themselves, Koinonians refocused as a group and then proceeded to reinvigorate their ministries in the local community — many of which will be discussed in greater detail in the next chapter.

Outreach in the black community was complicated through misunderstanding from those being ministered to as well as external hostilities from locals. African American workers in the area were attracted to the farm because of the high wages offered to them there — Koinonia paid “twice the going wage” to laborers, reasoning that higher wages would allow parents the freedom to take their children to school, rather than to help them scrape by.⁴⁹ Certainly a laudable system, the inflated remuneration undercut Koinonia’s goal of growing itself by inadvertently discouraging official membership. When posed with the choice of continuing to earn four dollars per day while staying on their own path, or renouncing the money and refocusing their life around the principles Koinonia enjoined on its affiliates, the supermajority of blacks chose the former option.⁵⁰

While the greater number of those who forsook Koinonia were black, numerous potential white members, struggling with its theology and principles, departed with a disconsolate “I can’t do it.”⁵¹ Koinonia seemed unable to convey its true intentions to both the black and white local populace, and repeatedly experienced disappointment as men, women, and whole families came and went. 1954 was the worst year in both growth and retention for the farm, marking “the first year since 1947 that no newcomers came to stay,” and ending with Koinonians lamenting (in

⁴⁸ *The Christian Century* (hereafter CC) 67 (September 6, 1950): 1053; CC 67 (October 11, 1950): 1204; KP AP, Farm Newsletter, January 12, 1951.

⁴⁹ K’Meyer, *Interracialism and Christianity*, 48.

⁵⁰ O’Connor, “A Rural Georgia Tragedy,” 36.

⁵¹ Lee, *Cotton Patch*, 86-88.

their final newsletter of the year): “we feel a great need for a more adequate witness to the local community.”⁵²

The lack of success Koinonia met with was not just comeuppance for their shortcomings — supposed or otherwise. There were undeniable external factors affecting its success, many of which stemmed from national politics. Cascading from Washington, decisions regarding the equality and rights of African Americans trickled down to distant cities like Americus. As these shifts were witnessed on the national level, segregationists were provoked to further entrench discriminatory practices in effort to halt the continued spread of progressive laws and policies. Not-so-subtle warnings that continued promotion of such forward-thinking policies could “jeopardize [the] friendly intercourse” purportedly existing between whites and blacks plagued newspapers, serving as harbingers of the internecine donnybrook that much of America would become over the coming decades.⁵³

This process was hurried with the election of President Truman, whose steps towards rectifying racism on a national level strengthened the resolve of racists bent on preserving an ethnic status-quo. Truman’s decision to desegregate the military and equalize America’s armed forces stands as one of the earliest catalysts for the Civil Rights Movement, almost instantly creating conflict as black servicemen were finally (legally) put on equal footing with their white counterparts.⁵⁴ His association with the National Association for the Advancement of Colored

⁵² *Ibid.*, 91; KP AP, Farm Newsletter, December 1954.

⁵³ ATR, “Absolute Segregation of Races Advocated by Governor Sparks,” April 5, 1943, 1

⁵⁴ Robert Carr to the President’s Committee on Civil Rights, May 15, 1947, Desegregation of the Armed Forces, Harry S. Truman Presidential Library (hereafter HSTL); Robert Carr to the President’s Committee on Civil Rights, June 10, 1947, Desegregation of the Armed Forces, HSTL; Memo “Concerning the Interpretation of the President’s Order Establishing the President’s Committee on Equality of Treatment and Opportunity in the Armed Services,” 1948, Desegregation of the Armed Forces, HSTL.

People (NAACP), instigated and maintained by promising “freedom and equality to all our citizens,” and condemning “discrimination because of ancestry... race, or color,” ensured that tensions would intensify.⁵⁵

Intensification reached a new apex in 1954, with the landmark Supreme Court case *Brown v. Board of Education (BoE)* ushering in unexpected levels of animosity and hostility. Those attempting to integrate previously white-only areas faced swift retribution as segregationists excoriated anyone attempting to redress the stratified system of the Black Nadir. Violent reprisals, boycotts, economic sanctions, and quasi-legal actions became commonplace methods for stymieing the advancement of one of liberal America’s crowning achievements in America’s *long durée* of interracial leveling. While this trend was first witnessed in larger cities, especially those in the south, its continued spread ensured ubiquitous reactionary emulations in cities like Americus.

The *Americus Time Recorder* heavily seasoned its pages with stories of resistance to the national policy in the coming months following the watershed decision from the Supreme Court. Articles favorably discussing the formation of new KKK chapters in surrounding areas, celebrating the continued allowance of segregated playgrounds, and praising the resolve of Georgia Tech football players to defeat the University of Pittsburgh in the coming Sugar Bowl — the latter team having dared to include a black student as a first-string player — became the norm as much of the white populace attempted to engender support for anti-integrationist action.⁵⁶ Such was the city’s devotion to the cause of preserving their “time-honored way of life”

⁵⁵ “Address to NAACP,” PBS Special Features, Primary Sources, 28 June 1947.

⁵⁶ ATR, “Klu Klux Klan Granted New State Charter,” October 25, 1955, 1 & 8; ATR, “Decision Upheld on Segregation in Playgrounds,” November 7, 1955, 1; ATR, “Race Issue Won’t Keep Tech from Sugar Bowl,” December 1, 1955, 3; ATR, “Protesting Techsters Burn Griffin in Effigy,” December 3, 1955, 1 & 6.

that Americus became an early hub for the resurgence of states' rights arguments, hosting Georgia's third "States' Rights Meet" with "delegates from each of the District's 24 counties" attending.⁵⁷

Koinonia, seen by many as an embodiment of the ideals driving decisions like *Brown v. BoE*, encountered measures typically reserved for blacks, as antagonists confronted one of the South's staunchest beacons of egalitarianism.⁵⁸ Despite repeated assurances from Koinonia that "genuine Christian community," not desegregation, was the focus of the commune, the group experienced a drastic shift in their treatment.⁵⁹ Jim Jordan, Jordan's son, recalled this change in heart several decades later:

"For the first 10 to 12 years, the surrounding community may have thought we were weird, but there was no open antagonism. Until about 1954... there was no real opposition. We were on good terms with our neighbors."⁶⁰

However, while Koinonia refused to directly involve themselves in the politicized white liberal movement, some of its members did implicitly involve the farm through their actions. This, coupled with the already mounting hostility, forced Koinonia to evaluate of what role it could and should play in the coming years.

Jordan was directly responsible for the final inciting incident needed for Sumter County denizens to turn against Koinonia. The first week of 1956 was marked by Americus's ostensible equalization of academic opportunities for blacks and whites through construction on a new

⁵⁷ ATR, "Georgia and Cause of Segregation Harmed," December 5, 1946, 6; ATR, "State's Rights Meet Set Here," January 2, 1956, 1 & 6; ATR, "Talmadge to Give Talk at Rights Rally," January 6, 1956, 1; ATR, "Must Unite, Organize and Fight to Keep Segregation Griffin, Leaders Stress," June 12, 1956, 1 & 2.

⁵⁸ K'Meyer, *Interracialism and Christianity*, 122-123.

⁵⁹ *Ibid.*, 118.

⁶⁰ KP AP, no. Aiii)a)II Clarence Remembered, "Growing Up At Koinonia," Transcript of interview with Jim Jordan, March 9, 2005.

school building for blacks to “eliminate the extreme space problem” present at the African-American school.⁶¹ By spring, Americus was harnessing McCarthyism’s deleterious power to condemn the Supreme Court for having “played directly in to the hands of communists” with *Brown v. BoE*, while simultaneously grandstanding Georgia State College’s (GSC) decision to refuse “at least six applications from Negroes.”⁶² In the midst of this turmoil, Jordan decided to sponsor two black students for admission into GSC’s College of Business Administration — GSC required potential students to have alumni sponsor them as a secondary defense against black students that met all other prerequisites.⁶³ The morning after Jordan attempted, and was denied, said sponsoring, the local newspaper trenchantly proclaimed, “Negroes Fail in Attempt to Enroll at Ga. College; Endorsed by Americus Man,” and lambasted both Jordan and Koinonia for daring to demonstrate anything less than a unified bloc against integration.⁶⁴

Reprisals from local whites were immediate, and varied from Koinonia’s “egg market in town [being] closed like a trap” to outright vandalism of the farm’s land, machinery, signs, and crops.⁶⁵ The hostilities only intensified and spread in the coming months and years, pushing Koinonia to the brink of destruction as it faced hurdle after hurdle. Political machinations slowed, if not altogether stopped, many of the farm’s larger ministries in the community,

⁶¹ ATR, “Construction Underway on Negro School Here,” January 6, 1956, 1; It is perhaps worth noting that this deplorable practice is just one example of a larger trend around America following the *Brown v. BoE* decision. Cities in the south, and north, attempted to justify continued segregation by “bettering” black schools in hopes that white ones would be allowed to remain just that. When this failed, private schools witnessed unprecedented growth as white families sent their children to the more expensive – and thus still predominantly white – institutions. Cost to the parents in the latter educational model is much higher, thereby preventing poorer parents (typically black ones) from enrolling their children – a still familiar problem in current times.

⁶² ATR, “The Integration Decree and the Reds,” March 3, 1956, 6; ATR, “More Negroes Ask Admittance to GA. School,” March 27, 1956.

⁶³ K’Meyer, *Interracialism and Christianity*, 84-84

⁶⁴ ATR, “Negroes Fail in Attempt to Enroll at Ga. College; Endorsed by Americus Man,” March 24, 1956, 1 & 6

⁶⁵ Lee, *Cotton Patch*, 106. Readers should be aware that eggs accounted for a large percentage of Koinonia’s income, and as such were vital to its continuation.

economic boycotts drove it to depend on the external community of likeminded individuals to sustain itself, and violent threats and attacks strained the dedication to pacifism and active goodwill that Koinonians had for years exemplified. No longer was Koinonia allowed to exist as a strange, though largely ignored, conglomerate of dissidents, beginning in 1956, and continuing for approximately fifteen years, the farm and its members struggled under the myopic attention of those intent on dissolving what they saw as an affront to Southern society.

CHAPTER 3

SOCIAL PROGRESSIVES

Until the March of 1956, Koinonia enjoyed a rewarding relationship with the black community in and around Americus. The focus on active goodwill towards all peoples — regardless of standing, background, or ethnicity — allowed Koinonians to effect change in a way unique to the region. Breaking from the typical white approach to black outreach that revolved around a patronizing paternalism, Jordan discouraged anything resembling a handout, or unmerited elevation, in favor of encouraging blacks and whites “to come together in common work, worship, and recreation.”⁶⁶ In encouraging a paradigm shift through this method of routine illustration, members of Koinonia provided a clear example of how whites and blacks could, and by extension should, live together. This manifestation of the ideals embedded in the white liberal movement distinguished Koinonia from other white progressives in the Deep South, and marked a decidedly unique approach to reforming black-white relations. Where the typical white southern progressive “tended to support industrial education for blacks” and little else, Koinonians promoted a restructuring of society itself by repudiating its mores and emulating the values espoused by the early-church in the Bible.⁶⁷

Before embarking on an examination of how Koinonia effected change, a brief synopsis of the white liberal movement it was breaking from is needed to contextualize the group’s effort and highlight its uniqueness. The purported white monolith in the South was anything but the impregnable bloc that segregationists attempted to present it as, and even the dissenters that

⁶⁶ K’Meyer, *Interracialism and Christianity*, 34

⁶⁷ Muhammad, *Condemnation of Blackness*, 27-28.

broke from mainline Southernism were themselves split by both their actions and goals.⁶⁸ In general, during most of the twentieth century, there were three groups of Southern whites existing at any given place: those who fought to preserve segregation, those who supported the Civil Rights Movement in action, and those who supported it “in spirit” or indirectly.⁶⁹ The white liberal movement in the South was comprised of these latter two groups, and only its most reserved members avoided ostracization by the region’s perpetually angry white, and leery black, communities.⁷⁰

Koinonia, through its unique approach, nestled itself squarely between the white activists on the frontlines that politicized their actions and the white supporters who hid in the background discreetly offering aid. Emerging as a fourth group, Koinonians refused to politicize their efforts in promoting egalitarianism between whites and blacks, but so challenged the South’s race-driven society that they experienced the same reprisals that blacks endured. Even as said response from local whites, and the Ku Klux Klan, received national attention through sundry white and black media outlets — establishing the commune as a bastion for the Civil Rights Movement in the eyes of myriad — its members endeavored to avoid the politicization of their actions as intentional participants in the struggle.

This is not to say that Koinonians were attempting to emulate the conscientious supporters who rarely risked more than their reputations in their dealings with, and support of,

⁶⁸ Michael McGerr, *A Fierce Discontent: The Rise and Fall of the Progressive Movement in America, 1870-1920* (New York: Free Press, 2014), 186-195.

⁶⁹ Chappell, *Inside Agitators*, 1-3.

⁷⁰ Linda Reed, *Simple Decency & Common Sense: The Southern Conference Movement, 1938-1963* (Indianapolis: Indiana University Press, 1994), 181-183. It was an unfortunate repercussion of the time that even the most sincere white advocate for the black struggle experienced difficulty in earning the acceptance and trust of the black community, and was subsequently left a stranger in his own hometown, excommunicated by his white neighbors and kept at a distance by his black neighbors.

the black struggle for equality. The shootings, bombings, beatings, boycotts, and excommunication that Koinonians endured because of their stance on race relations gives evidence to the contrary. Rather, it is to highlight the fact that Koinonians predominantly saw themselves as a group acting independently of both the white liberal movement and the Civil Rights Movement. Each espoused ideals that Koinonians similarly held, but neither did so in a manner that was inspired by Biblical principal and framed by a conviction that true change could not happen through demonstrations, legislation, or court rulings, but only through intentional day-to-day example.

Mentioned in the previous chapter, the approach Koinonia took to effect change in race relations encompassed even the simplest facets of life, including things as artless as meals. In 1942 and 1943, as Koinonia was rapidly burgeoning through Jordan's utilization of modern agrarian methods, one may see how this unassuming method challenged the very core of the southern racial system. Finally generating enough revenue to allow hiring some help, several blacks were employed to assist farm operations. Unlike in most areas of the South, these men earned competitive "white wages" — a decision that "challenged the southern labor system because it forced other landowners to do the same."⁷¹ Furthermore, this early exemplification of Koinonia's unique response to the race issue compounded with Jordan's and England's decision to not "set the precedent of eating apart from our black friends," but to instead insist on the black laborers eating with them.⁷²

Said decision affords insight into the inherent disparity between the approach Koinonia was promoting and the one followed by the typical Southern progressive in the liberal

⁷¹ K'Meyer, *Interracialism and Christianity*, 48.

⁷² Lee, *Cotton Patch*, 37-39; Jordan, "Koinonia Story," CLJ MC 756:10:9; *Washington Post*, December 1977, CLJ MC 2340:29.

movement. Koinonians chose to directly contest Southern tradition by electing to “make a witness” to their neighbors, albeit in the seemingly innocuous example of sharing a table with their black employees.⁷³ This atypical approach, contrasted with the usual process of active agitation practiced by other “frontline” whites, was one that challenged societal mores in a manner that discouraged confrontation and opposition. Intrinsically then, example became the impetus for change and what forced whites to reevaluate their belief systems and decide exactly what they thought should or should not be allowed.

While ministry to blacks was a key focus of Koinonia, the farm predominantly sought to promote brotherhood between races by edifying and aiding the black and white communities equally. By the end of their second month on the farm Jordan and England “had a surplus of fresh meat, milk, and butter” that they were sharing with “neighbors, both white and colored... to become better acquainted” with them while situating Koinonia within the community.⁷⁴ A more amusing illustration of the commune’s focus, its “cow library” reveals a dedication towards assuaging the difficulties faced by poor families in the Sumter County area, regardless of color.⁷⁵ Realizing that families were without dairy products because they could not afford a cow, Koinonia established a system by which families could “take out a milk cow and keep her until she went dry and then take out another one.”⁷⁶ This altruistic method of outreach allowed the farm to continue its effort of putting whites and blacks on equal footing, this time through a philanthropy that poor whites had to share equally with poor blacks.

⁷³ Lee, *Cotton Patch*, 37.

⁷⁴ KP AP, no. 2 Aiii)a) Clarence Jordan, Letter dated December, 1942.

⁷⁵ Lee, *Cotton Patch*, 44.

⁷⁶ KA AP, no. Ev) Race + Race Relations; Civil Rights, Ordeal by Bullets, May, 1957; KP AP, no. Aiii)a)I) Clarence’s Transcripts + Other Writings, Correspondence with IRS (1960s?).

There were, of course, endeavors undertaken that concentrated on blacks alone. In such instances, the intention was not to elevate African Americans over whites, but to balance the extreme vetting that African Americans in the south were forced to endure. The earliest, and most obvious, example of this was the bussing of black children to their school. *Plessy v. Ferguson* was still in full effect at Koinonia's incarnation, and would remain so for over a decade after, leaving blacks around the U.S. starved for education. Those that were able to attend one of the interspersed black schools often endured subpar education that stemmed from inadequate funding, as color-driven machinations ensured that white schools received the bulk of any educational subsidies. However, even a substandard education is better than a complete lack of one, so black parents continued to send their children to school whenever possible.

The problem that arose was sheer distance between the schools and where the children lived. For many, attending school meant traveling several miles one-way, and for the majority of black children that meant walking — whether in sun, rain, or frigid temperatures — as their parents had neither the means nor the time to secure any sort of transportation for them. Jordan and England quickly decided that these children needed a more secure and easier mode of getting to and from school, and so “obtain[ed] extra wartime gas ration stamps to take Negro children to school.”⁷⁷ Of course, word spread quickly of the white men helping black children get to school, and local high school superintendent E.L. Bridges presented local sentiments by protesting: “Niggers do out work for us around here and if we educate them they will all move away so I don't intend seeing them educated.”⁷⁸

⁷⁷ Lee, *Cotton Patch*, 42.

⁷⁸ KP AP, Clarence to Florence, December 7, 1942; Clarence Jordan, “Christian Community in the South,” *Journal of Religious Thought*, 14 (1957), 32; K Meyer, *Interracialism and Christianity*, 57.

Education remained a central focus of Koinonia's, however, and was not limited to just the transportation of children to school. A decade before Koinonia was founded, Jordan was voicing his belief that educated men and women, especially those who had benefitted from the racial quo, owed a debt to those that had suffered for their success.⁷⁹ He argued that the onus of repaying society fell predominately on the shoulders of peoples that received agronomical training and education, as they had the expertise needed to "set an example" for less educated farmers.⁸⁰ Holding to this belief, Jordan was afforded the perfect opportunity to live up to his standard in Sumter County beginning in 1943 as Koinonia began hosting educational events.

By 1960, Koinonia had taught seminars and classes on subjects ranging from "agriculture, religion, [and] mechanics" to "cooking, home-making, [and] sewing."⁸¹ Throughout this seventeen year period, anyone that was illiterate, uneducated, untrained, or just wanting to learn was encouraged and welcomed to come to any of the classes.⁸² The intention was to bring whites and blacks together in a learning experience, in hopes that doing so would bridge the gap between the communities by showing how little difference there was between them. Initially the educational ministry seemed to do just that, as members from both groups excitedly attended the lectures together. However, it became obvious that whites preferred to miss the event altogether rather than share a seat, or refreshments, with African Americans, and soon thereafter the classes became predominately black, interrupted only by the "occasional white straggler peeking in."⁸³

⁷⁹ Jordan to Glenn T. Settle, August 29, 1942, CLJ MC 756:2:2.

⁸⁰ Clarence L. Jordan, "What Price Should We Pay for a College Education?," *Georgia Agriculturalist* (hereafter GA) 9, November 1930, 5; Jordan, "Should College Graduates Return to the Farm?," GA 9, March 1931, 12.

⁸¹ KP AP, no. Aiii)a)I) Clarence's Transcripts + Other Writings, Correspondence with IRS (1960s?)

⁸² Henlee H. Barnette, *Clarence Jordan: Turning Dreams Into Deeds* (Macon: Smyth & Helwys Publishing: 1992), 64-66.

⁸³ K'Meyer, *Interracialism and Christianity*, 47.

The commune should not be denigrated to an educational center, though education was a chief focus of it, but rather observed “as a community center where people could come together for work, worship, and fellowship.”⁸⁴ It sought not only to educate adults, but to provide community recreation. An “interracial Sunday school and sing-along,” weekly fellowship night, and regular visits to homes and churches of their neighbors quickly transformed Koinonia into a hub of activities for locals.⁸⁵ In assuming this role, the farm made a concerted effort to provide an environment in which learning could occur without discrimination or favoritism, especially for children. Vacation Bible School (VBS) and summer camp constituted the crux of this focus, as their intensive natures allowed for more in-depth teaching of, and exposure to, the progressive tenets farm members adhered to.

VBS attracted children of all colors, and established a “less intimidating” front for Koinonians to continue working in the local area.⁸⁶ Originating in the white communities through its Baptist churches, VBS had for years been the tool used annually to artificially assuage the burdens of the deprecated with a week-long diversion from the burden of penury. At its heart, the ministry was designed to help those in need, and Koinonia resituated its application to ensure that it did just that. Turning it into their “best-received mission effort,” members “drove the truck around to the farms within a five to six-mile radius” to ensure those living close enough to attend were able to.⁸⁷ These efforts were rewarded with an “average attendance of 80” children, each of which experienced unadulterated equality firsthand for at least seven days a year.⁸⁸

⁸⁴ *Ibid.*, 51

⁸⁵ *Ibid.*, 50, 71.

⁸⁶ Lee, *Cotton Patch*, 43.

⁸⁷ K’Meyer, *Interracialism and Christianity*, 50.

⁸⁸ KP AP, no. Aiii)aI) Clarence’s Transcripts + Other Writings, Correspondence with IRS (1960s?).

Over a decade later, in 1955, finally having the requisite funding and manpower to do so, Koinonia supplemented their VBS program with a summer camp. The camp was similar to VBS in both its reach and focus, but allowed children to actually reside on the farm for approximately two months of “wholesome food, recreation and training in a relaxed atmosphere.”⁸⁹ It promised to be a “vital part of education” for children by teaching both agrarian and scholastic subjects to those who attended, while exposing them to the progressive ideologies espoused by farm members.⁹⁰ Children from “Atlanta, Nashville... Indiana, Louisiana, and even the United States Embassy in India” joined together at Koinonia to learn and grow together in what became “one of Koinonia’s most successful interracial ventures.”⁹¹

The collective efforts of Koinonia in effecting change in the aforementioned ways, as well as others, firmly established the farm as both a bulwark and inspiration for progressives in Georgia and around the nation.⁹² The unique way in which they were attempting to transform society — a method referred to as a “live-in” by Jordan, instead of the sit-in’s that were growing in popularity — gave activists in the Civil Rights Movement a much-needed place of respite, and ample footing from which to launch their campaigns in the area.⁹³ The National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP) and the Student Non-violent Coordinating Committee (SNCC) found in Koinonia support, protection, and encouragement “that the white

⁸⁹ *Ibid.*

⁹⁰ KP AP, “Koinonia Farm Camp: An Adventure in Community Livin-Sharing,” brochure, 1955.

⁹¹ K’Meyer, *Interracialism and Christianity*, 72.

⁹² Tuck, *Beyond Atlanta*, 178; K’Meyer, *Interracialism and Christianity*, 101.

⁹³ Jim Auchmutey, *The Class of ’65: A Student, A Divided Town, and the Long Road to Forgiveness* (New York: Public Affairs, 2015), 79.

community contained figures who were repulsed by the system of segregation and disenfranchisement” designed to cow blacks.⁹⁴

Revered R. L. Freeman moved to Americus in in 1946, as Koinonia was really emerging in the Sumter County area, to pastor Bathesda Baptist Church and assume leadership of the local NAACP chapter.⁹⁵ Tenaciously dedicated to “trying to work things, and making it happen,” Freeman repeatedly accepted retrenching stipulations, such as meeting with white leaders’ afterhours when nobody would witness the interaction, in attempt to further the black cause.⁹⁶ In the African-American community he ardently endorsed education as “the only way to get out of slavery, to get out of the boundaries and bondage” that ensnared myriad blacks simply because they knew no better and thus could do no better.⁹⁷ His principles drew the attention of Koinonians, and he was not long in Americus before he and Jordan had met to talk and discuss their different, but intertwined, roles in the lives of impoverished blacks in the area — a practice that carried on to future NAACP leaders like J.R. Campbell as well.⁹⁸

The men, and by effect the organizations they were involved in, continued to work in their distinctive spheres, but looked for opportunities to support one another no matter how trivial the occasion. For Freeman, this largely meant monthly visits during which he would deliver sermons and lead services, further cementing their shared egalitarian cause; for Koinonia, it meant ensuring that the Freeman family woke to “boxes of vegetables and fruits,” and had

⁹⁴ David Chappell, *Inside Agitators: White Southerners in the Civil Rights Movement* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1994), 4.

⁹⁵ Sumter Oral History Project (hereafter SOHP), Georgia Southwestern State University, Interview with Juanita Freeman Wilson.

⁹⁶ Ibid., Interview with Robertina Freeman Fletcher, Disc One, Track One; Ibid., Interview with Warren Fortson, Disc One, Track Two.

⁹⁷ Ibid., Interview with Juanita Freeman Wilson.

⁹⁸ Ibid., Interview with Rev. J.R. & Mamie Campbell, Disc One, Track One

whites they could call on to aide disparaged blacks who needed white advocates.⁹⁹ However, the Americus chapter of the NAACP, in comparison to other chapters, “was inactive and on the brink of disbanding,” leaving a hole in the local progressive movement for other Civil Rights groups to fill.¹⁰⁰

Into this void stepped the SNCC. Beginning in 1962, the organization “launched a major project that sought to bring the civil rights movement to southwest Georgia.”¹⁰¹ SNCC sought to engender progress akin to what had been witnessed in Atlanta, and other larger cities, in more rural areas where demarcation had perpetually trapped blacks. As one would expect, early attempts were dishearteningly unsuccessful, leaving the “pioneering projects” of this new thrust, Lee and Terrell Counties, both unchanged and unapologetic in their race-driven machinations.¹⁰² The SNCC refused to be so easily dissuaded from its cause, despite these preliminary failings, and continued in its attempt at provoking change in Southwest Georgia by choosing a new target: Sumter County.

As with most progressive efforts in the area, Koinonia played an influential role in assisting with the establishment of SNCC in Americus. Charles Sherrod, the man spearheading SNCC’s Southwest Georgia Project from nearby Albany, “was a frequent visitor” to the farm and recognized its potential as a “safe haven and a center for staff training.”¹⁰³ From Koinonia SNCC infiltrated Sumter County through “the most important thing the black community had:” its churches — religious organizations that had for decades served a “multitude of spiritual, social,

⁹⁹ Ibid., Interview with Juanita Freeman Wilson.

¹⁰⁰ K’Meyer, *Interracialism and Christianity*, 84.

¹⁰¹ Tuck, *Beyond Atlanta*, 158-159.

¹⁰² Ibid., 163.

¹⁰³ Auchmutey, *The Class of ’65*, 78; Tuck, *Beyond Atlanta*, 178; K’Meyer, *Interracialism and Christianity*, 152; *The Crisis*, NAACP, vol. 10, no. 4, September/October 1998, 17.

and political functions.”¹⁰⁴ In so doing, the group inspired a seemingly indelible movement amongst black students who believed that their participation would enjoin upon society a progressive revolution. Arriving in unexpected droves, the student response was such that publications recorded the young activists as being “the first to respond,” lauding how “in the early demonstrations [they] carried it almost alone.”¹⁰⁵

Nascent efforts of the SNCC in Americus centered on voter registration, and gradually developed into challenging businesses, and societal mores in general, that promoted discriminatory practices and attitudes. In the move toward desegregating public areas the Martin Theater, as the “biggest symbol of segregation in Americus,” provided the stage from which blacks would deliver their ardent protests against the perverting influence of racism in the area.¹⁰⁶ The cinema had, since its opening, required African Americans to use an alley to access the back door to the theater, where they could purchase their tickets before continuing to their sequestered seating area — a balcony in the back of the theater designed to keep blacks seated there hidden from moviegoers on the main floor.¹⁰⁷ Demonstrations began with “local Negroes [attempting] to use the front door... instead of the rear balcony entrance,” and the subsequent response of the police created one of the most infamous stories of racial castigation in southwest Georgia: the “Stolen Girls.”¹⁰⁸

African Americans participating in the marches for desegregation in Americus endured the treatment of a police force led by Sheriff Fred Chappell — a man Martin Luther King Jr.

¹⁰⁴ Tera W. Hunter, *To 'Joy My Freedom: Southern Black Women's Lives and Labors After the Civil War* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1997), 68; SOHP, Interview with Juanita Freeman Wilson.

¹⁰⁵ *Southern Patriot* 23, November 1965.

¹⁰⁶ Auchmutey, *The Class of '65*, 82.

¹⁰⁷ SOHP, Interview with Juanita Freeman Wilson.

¹⁰⁸ Civil Rights Movement Veterans (Hereafter CRMV), Americus Georgia: SNCC Special Mailing, September 24, 1963, <http://www.crmvet.org/index.htm>.

referred to as “the meanest man in the world.”¹⁰⁹ It should be of little surprise then that even suspicion of participation often resulted in police brutality against, and incarceration of, the person under scrutiny; regardless of age or gender as the story of the “Stolen Girls” reveals.¹¹⁰

On the way to Martin Theater to protest segregation, Robertiena Fletcher, daughter of Rev. Freeman, and those marching with her weren’t even given the chance to remonstrate:

We didn’t have a chance to actually protest on a business or anything, because I can just remember the police riding up and the paddy-wagon doors opening. And then they’re shoving us into the paddy-wagon. And they just took us off to jail.”¹¹¹

The arrest of the girls in this company of youth set in motion what arguably became the most shameful act during the Americus Movement.

With all the jails in and around Americus at near-capacity with jailed activists, and fresh detainees still coming in, the sheriff approved housing the female prisoners thirty miles south of Americus in Dawson’s jailhouse. Approximately two dozen girls, whose ages ranged from ten years old to fifteen, were then moved, without warning or explanation to them or their parents, the following evening from the jailhouse to a retired Civil War stockade in Lee County.¹¹² The girls were required to share two toilets that did not work, a showerhead and faucet that barely provided drinking water, and the concrete slab upon which they sat and slept, while being provided undercooked hamburgers for sustenance.¹¹³

¹⁰⁹ Glenn M. Robins, "Americus Movement," *New Georgia Encyclopedia*, February 29, 2008; Tuck, *Beyond Atlanta*, 176; Civil Rights History Project, U.S, Hasan Kwame Jeffries, and Sam Mahone. *Sam Mahone Oral History Interview Conducted by Hasan Kwame Jeffries in Albany, Georgia, 2013-03-09*. Albany, Georgia, March 9, 2013. Video. Retrieved from the Library of Congress.

¹¹⁰ Donna M. Owens, “Stolen Girls,” *Essence*, June 1, 2006; CRMV, Americus GA Movement & “Seditious Conspiracy,” 1963 (July-December), <http://www.crmvet.org/tim/tim63b.htm#1963b-28>.

¹¹¹ SOHP, Interview with Robertiena Freeman Fletcher, Disc One, Track Two.

¹¹² Bradley George and Grant Blankenship, “The Girls of the Leesburg Stockade,” *Georgia Public Broadcasting News*, July 19, 2016.

¹¹³ SOHP, Interview with Juanita Freeman Wilson; CRMV, Americus Georgia: SNCC Special Mailing, September 24, 1963, <http://www.crmvet.org/index.htm>; *The Student Voice*, Special Issue, SNCC, Spring 1964, 4.

Those whose parents had power in the local community managed to secure releases for their daughters after a few weeks, but the majority of the girls in the stockade were held there for eight to ten weeks. Jordan worked with the fathers of Carolyn Deloach — whose father was the principal of the colored school in Americus — and Robertiena and Juanita Freeman — both daughters of the previously mentioned R.L. Freeman — to encourage the release of these and other girls by drawing attention to the conditions they were enduring, but even these first releases spent approximately one month in the stockade.¹¹⁴ SNCC efforts in Sumter County were not stymied by the Leesburg incident, but instead seemed almost emboldened throughout the next several years. However, the local police force altered their tactics following this debacle — due to the national attention it received thanks the snapshots surreptitiously taken by SNCC photographer Danny Lyon — and shifted away from the policy of arresting everyone on the scene in favor of arresting the active instigators.

As this and other occurrences were happening in the Americus Movement, Koinonia continued in its role as social progressives in Sumter County and abroad. Though Koinonians, as a matter of principle, refused to directly engage in demonstrations designed to attract attention and incite incidents that would force change, their support until said point was unmatched in the area. For SNCC efforts, Koinonia helped establish the first, and subsequent, “SNCC house[s]” in the area — buildings that served as both a residence and quasi-headquarters for SNCC leaders in rural areas — and allowed the activists to use their mimeograph equipment “to put out a newsletter about the movement, *Voice of Americus*.”¹¹⁵

¹¹⁴ SOHP, Interview with Robertiena Freeman Fletcher, Disc Two, Track One; Ibid., Interview with Warren Forston, Disc Two and Three; Ibid., Interview with Juanita Freeman Wilson.

¹¹⁵ Civil Rights History Project, U.S, Hasan Kwame Jeffries, and Sam Mahone. *Sam Mahone Oral History Interview Conducted by Hasan Kwame Jeffries in Albany, Georgia, 2013-03-09*. Albany, Georgia, March 9, 2013. Video. Retrieved from the Library of Congress; Auchmutey, *The Class of '65*, 84; Tuck, *Beyond Atlanta*, 178.

The concerted efforts of Koinonia in the area, in combination with their unwavering dedication to promoting equality through non-polarizing means, worked to inspire other whites to emulate their example. The best, and most influential, example of this in Americus being Warren Fortson. Sumter County's county attorney, Fortson, like many other whites, spent much of his life unaware of just how heavy the burden of blackness was for African Americans.¹¹⁶ However, after prosecuting Koinonia on behalf of Americus — a case that will be explored in the next chapter — Fortson visited the farm to assuage his guilt by asking forgiveness, and in the ensuing visit was impacted by the words of Jordan.¹¹⁷ From then on he “grew increasingly sensitive to injustice, hypocrisy and bigotry” and “became aware of the Negro's plight.”¹¹⁸

Inspired by his experience at Koinonia, Fortson chose to mimic the examples of its members by becoming a player in the Americus Movement. Beginning in 1963, after witnessing the Stolen Girls debacle, Fortson took an active role as a defender and advocate of blacks and their campaign for equality.¹¹⁹ No case was too big or small, and he worked tirelessly to defend blacks on issues ranging from their right “to be called Mr. and Mrs.” to calumnious accusations like the ones faced by Alex Brown and Robertiena Freeman — both of whom were local student leaders in the Americus Movement — as whites attempted to undercut integration progress.¹²⁰

¹¹⁶ SOHP, Interview with Warren Fortson, Disc One.

¹¹⁷ Ibid., Auchmutey, *The Class of '65*, 61-62.

¹¹⁸ KP AP, no. 6.Ai)a) The Cowles Collection, Koinonia Newsletter #32, November 1965.

¹¹⁹ Marshall Frady, *Southerners, A Journalist's Odyssey* (New York: Plume, 1981), 232-233; J. Morgan Kousser, *Colorblind Injustice: Minority Voting Rights and the Undoing of the Second Reconstruction* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1999), 219; *Southern Patriot* 23, August 1965, 3.

¹²⁰ SOHP, Interview with Warren Fortson, Disc One. Alex Brown and Robertiena Freeman were arrested under charge of fornicating in a public park and, while the accusation could not be proven, their probation from being arrested in 1963 ensured that both would be out of Americus for the next several years. See Tuck, *Beyond Atlanta*, pages 180-181, and footnote 88 on page 290.

Fortson's most laudable attempt at encouraging change in race relations, and one that elucidates the influence of Koinonia on him, was his "proposal for the formation of a biracial council to break through the blunderings... of the white and black communities."¹²¹ However, his endeavor to effect change outside of the judicial system quickly imploded, as miscommunication ensured the "collapse of the dialogue between racial leaders" and subsequent dismantling of the committee he had so zealously created.¹²² In the aftermath "the community got spotlighted," and Fortson, held culpable for the events by local leaders, "became a pariah" in Sumter County and was forced to leave Americus and continue his fight in Atlanta.¹²³

Following the example of the NAACP and SNCC, the Congress of Racial Equality (CORE), founded the same year as Koinonia, began its work in the Sumter County region through the commune. Zev Aelony entered the Progressive Movement in in the 1950s when he organized the Students for Integration group at the University of Minnesota, and from there continued on to become an influential member of CORE.¹²⁴ Happening upon an editorial in 1958 that delineated the siege that Koinonia was enduring at the hands of racists, Aelony was impressed with the members' convictions and determined to visit the farm the next summer — after he returned from Israel.¹²⁵

Aelony "lived with [Koinonians] off and on for several years" after moving to Georgia, and worked during this period to collect evidence of mistreatment of blacks to catalyze Civil

¹²¹ Marshall Frady, "One Another Town," *Life*, February 12, 45C-46D

¹²² Tuck, *Beyond Atlanta*, 182-183; Laughlin McDonald, *A Voting Rights Odyssey: Black Enfranchisement in Georgia* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2003), 94-100.

¹²³ SOHP, Interview with Warren Fortson, Disc One, Two, Three; KP AP, no. 6.Ai)a) The Cowles Collection, Koinonia Newsletter #32, November 1965

¹²⁴ Stanford Eugene Lehmborg, *The3 University of Minnesota: 1945-2000* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2001), 97-99

¹²⁵ University of Mississippi Library Digital Collections, Freedom Rider Oral Histories, Interview with Zev Aelony, 2001.

Rights organizations.¹²⁶ However, he quickly fell into the role of “agricultural worker,” as he endeavored to initiate joint projects between CORE and Koinonia, urging the former to “organize a producers’ cooperative at the farm” that would “give African Americans a measure of economic independence.”¹²⁷ His laudable efforts at a practical solution to the burdens assailing blacks aligned very closely with those of Koinonians, and encouraged a relationship between the two parties that both culminated in successful ventures while inspiring future ones.

While aiding blacks economically, many of the Koinonians insisted on showing their political support by attending mass-meetings in Albany during the city’s movement, and repeating the process once they began in Americus. The expected hostile or apathetic reception for these white visitors was anything but, as blacks welcomed members of Koinonia as fellow crusaders because of their roles as early motivators. Such was their reception that it was not uncommon for the Koinonians in attendance to stay well after the meeting had concluded to talk with leaders and share ideas, preferring to work behind the scenes than to accept leadership “because they believed blacks had to head the movement” and knew there was an ideological divide between the approaches that would only breed discontent.¹²⁸

Best surmised by Jordan, Koinonians resolutely held to the belief that the solution for assuaging and absolving racial conflict “lies in God and in Grace, not in government and law.”¹²⁹ While they acknowledged that the Civil Rights Movement was making progress, they feared that it was only superficial and would cause greater issues as integration was forced rather than accepted. This fear stemmed from the historical examples touted by Jordan of the state of

¹²⁶ Auchmutey, *The Class of '65*, 84-85.

¹²⁷ Tuck, *Beyond Atlanta*, 174; K’Meyer, *Interracialism and Christianity*, 158-159, 174.

¹²⁸ K’Meyer, *Interracialism and Christianity*, 150-1.

¹²⁹ Clarence Jordan, *Substance of Faith: And Other Cotton Patch Sermons* (Eugene: Wipf & Stock Pub, 2005), 105

African Americans in the years immediately after the Civil War: “Lincoln emancipated the slave politically but not economically. He remains an economic slave, and he doesn’t want to vote as much as he wants to eat.”¹³⁰ It naturally followed then that Koinonia chose to support the Civil Rights Movement so long as its members abstained from militant and intentionally provocative methods, and ceased to actively do so when its leaders adopted the more caustic approach that was typical to the later struggle.

With the emergence of direct-confrontation methods in 1963, the commune began to slowly separate itself from the Civil Rights Movement. That is not to say that it ceased promoting egalitarianism, nor that terminated its outreach programs, but that it began to retreat from its active role in the Americus Movement. Koinonia could not engage with peoples who were encouraging the very thing they had for over twenty years attempted to avoid, and the proliferation of Black Power advocates that “were less willing to enlist white allies” encouraged disengagement with, and condemnation of, the divisive methods and rhetoric beginning to permeate the Civil Rights Movement.¹³¹

Even with the gradual separation from the Civil Rights Movement, Koinonia continued to work through social progressivism in Sumter County, and abroad, to promote equality in a sincere and practical manner. Struggling to find their purpose in the mid-to-late 1960s, Jordan and the remaining Koinonians were on the brink of closing the farm, or leaving it for others to manage, before they discovered a new focus.¹³² As Martin England had, over two decades earlier, catalyzed Jordan’s dream and helped with its incarnation, Millard Fuller helped revitalize the waning experiment by transmogrifying the commune.

¹³⁰ K’Meyer, *Interracialism and Christianity*, 149.

¹³¹ *Ibid.*, 155-157; Auchmutey, *The Class of ’65*, 154.

¹³² K’Meyer, *Interracialism and Christianity*, 167.

Millard Fuller was an unlikely match for any sort of involvement with Koinonia. A millionaire through his work as a lawyer and businessman, and directly involved in the court proceeding against the Freedom Riders in Montgomery, it seems almost inconceivable that he would even visit the commune. However, he did just that in 1965, and what was supposed to be a two hour visit became a lifelong commitment.¹³³ The ensuing years revolved around the discourse between Fuller and Jordan, as the former rekindled the spirit of the latter and brought new focus to Jordan's Great Experiment. Through Fuller, Koinonia was inspired to begin the Fund for Humanity and, more importantly, the now global outreach Habitat for Humanity.¹³⁴

Beginning in 1968, Koinonia “decided to substitute a ‘partnership’ system” in place of the communal approach practiced thus far, choosing to focus on “providing jobs and homes for poor blacks who otherwise might join the exodus to urban ghettos.”¹³⁵ Within a year, Koinonia Partners — as Jordan and Fuller so rebranded it — had designated and divided enough land for “forty-two half-acre homes sites,” half of which would be built by Koinonia and the rest by whoever leased the land.¹³⁶ The aftermath of this decision was felt by whites throughout Sumter County, as impoverished blacks now had a place to live where the cost of land and housing were minimalized and a twenty-year payment plan, kept interest free and at half the normal rate, encouraged stewardship and self-motivation.¹³⁷

¹³³ Blackshear Regional Library, Sumter County, Americus, Research File (Hereafter BRL RF): SC-VF 975.8913, Koinonia Farm, *Americus Times Recorder*, “Fuller Reminisces about the Early Days of Koinonia at the Dedication of the Historic Mile Marker, October 30, 2005.

¹³⁴ Millard Fuller and Diane Scott, *Love in the Mortar Joints: The Story of Habitat for Humanity* (El Monte: New Win Publishing, 1980), Chapter 4.

¹³⁵ *Ibid.*, Newspaper Clipping from *Atlanta Journal and Constitution* dated May 21, 1972.

¹³⁶ *Ibid.*, *The Atlanta Constitution*, “Farming, Housing and Industry Drive Koinonia Humanity Group, July 7, 1969.

¹³⁷ *Ibid.*, *The Christian Century*, “Koinonia Updated,” October 13, 1976.

Simultaneously, “stimulating local industry to create new jobs” drove Koinonia to expand its “pecan, candy, and fruit cake direct-mail business.”¹³⁸ This was done with the dual intention of generating revenue for the Fund for Humanity that was used to supply the aforementioned new approach, and creating jobs for those who were unable to find work in Sumter County’s strained economy.¹³⁹ Thus Koinonia, “by dropping what had seemed most objectionable to African Americans — the full sharing — and replacing it with cooperation,” effectively continued its unique outreach by altering its approach to match the needs of the area.¹⁴⁰ Blacks could now find housing and work through Koinonia, without the pressure of abjuring personal belongings, and as such continued to be edified by the commune well after the Americus Movement dissipated.

This continued bent towards social progress that Koinonia strove for, even after the Americus Movement had run its course, illustrates the uniqueness of the commune’s farm all the more clearly. White and black activists, as in other areas, concentrated on forcing change in Sumter County through mandated advancement that rarely offered immediate benefits. Furthermore, such an approach often established only a facade of progress that hid the deplorable conditions blacks were still mired in. Koinonians, in comparison, sought to effect the same change through a more gradual process that would cease only with the termination of any form of discrimination or debasement. Thus, while both approaches sought the same goal, the latter’s slower grassroots methodology ensured societal equalization and overall progress in race relations.

¹³⁸ Ibid., *The Christian Century*, “Koinonia Updated,” October 13, 1976; Lee, *Cotton Patch Evidence*, 215.

¹³⁹ Lee, *Cotton Patch Evidence*, 209.

¹⁴⁰ K’Meyer, *Interracialism and Christianity*, 173.

CHAPTER 4

A CANCER ON THE COMMUNITY

It took little more than a twenty-four hour period in the March of 1956 for Koinonia to be demonized by the South as one of its worst pariahs. Cities around Georgia denounced the Sumter County-based farm, and newspapers pejoratively described Koinonia as “A ‘Cancer’ on the Community.”¹⁴¹ What earned the innocuous experiment such harsh reception was, quite simply, it’s proclaimed purpose. Even before Jordan excited such hostilities Koinonia experienced estrangement, existing in a state of limbo between their archetypally myopic white neighbors and the skeptical blacks they attempted to reach. Their continued emphasis on promoting egalitarian race relations, and dogged determination to engender this shift themselves, ensured that members and associates of the commune incited the acrimony of a society tenaciously entrenching itself against any such change. Furthermore, by assimilating themselves into the society that was resisting their message, and attempting to dismantle it from the inside, Koinonians placed themselves in a position that caused their actions to appear as a pseudo-betrayal to whites.

As is often the case, there were underlying tensions that encouraged this drastic shift in the reception Koinonia experienced. Prior to Jordan inadvertently exciting blatant hostilities, Koinonians enjoined a predominately peaceful, if not estranged, status alongside their white and black neighbors. Consternation regarding ministries to African Americans was virtually non-

¹⁴¹ KP AP, Koinonia Farm Volume I (1949-1957), *Macon Telegraph*, “Americus Bi-Racial Farm: A ‘Cancer’ on Community,” February 17.

existent, and when it did arise rarely surpassed calumny or verbal confrontation. White involvement in black communities was not unheard of in Sumter County, or elsewhere in the south, but was only allowed under extenuating circumstances when there was ample need and a justifying cause for such association.

The Christian church, beginning in the nineteenth century and continuing well into the twentieth, provided both the impetus and means for whites to superficially reach their black neighbors. Paternalistically driven, such outreach innately “preserve[d] white supremacy” by emphasizing the inability of African Americans to sustain themselves without white assistance.¹⁴² Framed around pejoratives “frequently commented in letters, journals, sermons, and articles about the racial differences between whites and blacks,” it accentuated the purported disparities between ethnic groups and promoted “attendant segregation of the races.”¹⁴³ Subsequently, avowedly Christian groups such as Koinonia experienced general, albeit questioning, acceptance in the South based on the assumption that said groups were continuing to perpetuate the aforementioned ideological divide typical of the milieu.

What made Koinonia so unique was its abnegation of these ideals and mores in a period when the majority of their white neighbors were doing all they could to preserve them. Jordan “was the southerner of southerners,” thoroughly indoctrinated in Southern values and embodying the spirit of the region in his mannerism and education.¹⁴⁴ As such, his experiment in communal living was expected to mirror Southern values and, while skeptically received, was nonetheless allowed. However, as it became evident that the intention was “to make a contribution to the

¹⁴² Carolyn Renée Dupont, *Mississippi Praying: Southern White Evangelicals and the Civil Rights Movement, 1945-1975* (New York: New York University Press, 2015), 121-126.

¹⁴³ Mary Beth Swetnam Mathews, *Doctrine and Race: African American Evangelicals and Fundamentalism between the Wars* (Tuscaloosa: University of Alabama Press, 2017), 13-14.

¹⁴⁴ Lee, *Cotton Patch*, 4-5.

lives of all those who suffer and are oppressed,” which in the South meant the African-American community especially, locals began to express distrust, opposition, and eventually hostility.¹⁴⁵

Koinonia was not the first group to attempt challenging racial paradigms in the South, but it reserves the honor of being the region’s most enduring vanguard of the Progressive Movement. Its closest competitor, The Highlander Folk School, founded in Tennessee, predates Koinonia by approximately one decade, but complications forced the former to dissolve, relocate, and rename itself only three decades after its establishment.¹⁴⁶ Additionally, Highlander and Koinonia are further estranged by their response to the Civil Rights Movement. While both groups engaged with Civil Rights leaders, and lent support to the effort, Highlander followed the more overt of direct involvement via training and sponsoring of Civil Rights figures – Rosa Parks being the quintessential example — while Koinonia chose to concentrate on its internal approach from within the white community.¹⁴⁷

In following Jordan’s “live-in” approach, Koinonia incited the ire of its neighbors because of the impact such an approach has.¹⁴⁸ Unlike with overt progressive efforts, Koinonia’s challenging of the racial-quo was more difficult to stop. There were no demonstrators to seize, legal battles to undercut, or central leaders to arrest. Instead, Koinonia stood for “every one of the nonviolent movements in the South” as “an example of some white folks who care” through sheer unwavering example.¹⁴⁹ With the normal targets missing, those opposed to what Koinonia

¹⁴⁵ O’Connor, “A Rural Georgia Tragedy,” 5.

¹⁴⁶ For a comprehensive narrative of Highlander’s history see John M. Glen, *Highlander: No Ordinary School, 1932-1962* (Lexington: The University Press of Kentucky, 1988).

¹⁴⁷ Myles Horton and Paulo Friere, *We Make the Road by Walking* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1990), xxiv; Southern Oral History Program Collection, Interview with Don West (#4007), January 22, 1975, Tape 1 Side A.

¹⁴⁸ Auchmutey, *The Class of ’65*, 79.

¹⁴⁹ K’Meyer, *Interracialism*, 122.

stood for were forced to resort to other means in attempt to stifle the message being disseminated by the commune — a choice that inadvertently drew national attention and solidified the “external community [that] helped Koinonia survive.”¹⁵⁰

The first action taken against Koinonia, beyond haranguing, was incited by the sponsoring of two black students for admittance into Georgia State College in the March of 1956. Sam Williams, “a longtime African-American friend in Atlanta,” contacted Jordan inquiring into the possibility of him sponsoring Thelma B. Boone and Edward J. Clemons for college admittance.¹⁵¹ Jordan insisted on meeting with the students in question before agreeing to anything, voicing trepidation over the possibility of the event being used by activists to continue forcing the issue of desegregation through the judicial and legislative systems he was sought to avoid.¹⁵² Determining that the students in question were making an honest attempt at education, not pseudo-martyrdom, Jordan agreed to sponsor them, traveling with them to GSC only to be denied the opportunity on a technicality.¹⁵³ Nonetheless, the attempt in itself was enough to generate animosity from locals, and attract the attention of one of Georgia’s most imperious governors, Marvin Griffin, who called on the sheriff of Americus to investigate “this Jordan fellow.”¹⁵⁴

Mentioned briefly in the previous chapter, said investigation devolved into a donnybrook aimed at discrediting Koinonia and undercutting its future impact. The biggest, and easiest, target for this was the summer camp that had, the year before, drawn dozens of children from diverse

¹⁵⁰ Ibid., 99; Robert Lee, “The Crisis at Koinonia,” *The Christian Century*, November 7, 1956, 1290-1291.

¹⁵¹ K'Meyer, *Interracialism*, 84.

¹⁵² Ibid., 84-84; Auchmutey, *The Class of '65*, 37.

¹⁵³ Lee, *Cotton Patch*, 105-106.

¹⁵⁴ Clarence Jordan to the Nelsons and Johnsons, April 1, 1956, CLJ MC 756:3:6; KP AP Farm Newsletter, August 18, 1956.

backgrounds to spend two months learning, among other things, to ignore the incorporeal walls separating ethnicities.¹⁵⁵ Approximately three months after Jordan's fateful trip to Atlanta, in June of 1956, Sumter County filed an injunction against Koinonia's camp citing health code violations that would place attendees in danger.¹⁵⁶ When the designated official investigated the claim near the end of the month he could find no such violations, and even stated (later) that Koinonia "was as clean as place as you ever saw in your life."¹⁵⁷

Before the proverbial dust had settled from *Sumter County Health Department v. Koinonia Farm Inc.*, four locals filed a companion suit alleging that "the operation of the camp would be detrimental to the morals of the children" in attendance.¹⁵⁸ The chief protest for this second legal action, or at least the one that was voiced, was the potentially negative impact of witnessing animals being born, rather than "the real issue — the interracial feature of the camp."¹⁵⁹ This legal battle, as with the first, was eventually dissolved, but not before it served its purpose of preventing Camp Koinonia from being held at the farm.¹⁶⁰ Furthermore, the proceedings had unforeseen effects on both Koinonia and the Sumter County.

Perhaps most surprising turn for those attempting to disparage Koinonia, the legal attacks generated support for the commune around the country as periodicals published stories detailing the cases.¹⁶¹ Thus, in attempting to quiet Koinonia's voice, Sumter County inadvertently ensured

¹⁵⁵ KP AP, "Koinonia Farm Camp: An Adventure in Community Living-Sharing," brochure, 1955.

¹⁵⁶ *Sumter County Health Department v. Koinonia Farm Inc.*, CLJ MC 756:20:3

¹⁵⁷ Lee, *Cotton Patch*, 106-107; Interview with Osgood Williams, June 2, 1988, by Cliff Kuhn, Georgia Government Documentation Project, Box B-9, Folder 6, Georgia State University.

¹⁵⁸ K'Meyer, *Interracialism*, 89; ATR, "Superior Court Hearing Thursday," July 17, 1956, 1.

¹⁵⁹ KP AP, no. 6.Ai)a) The Cowles Collection, Koinonia Newsletter, September 24, 1956.

¹⁶⁰ ATR, "Koinonia Injunction Hearing is Continued," July 2, 1956, 1 & 6; ATR, "Camp Injunction will Remain in Force Here," July 19, 1956, 1 & 6; ATR, "Koinonia Asks Continuance in Youth Camp Case," August 2, 1956, 1; ATR, "No Plans Made for Youth Camp," August 4, 1956, 1.

¹⁶¹ KP AP, *Koinonia Farm Vol I (1949-1957)* (Hereafter KFVI), *Pittsburg Courier*, "Interracial Camp Fights to Reopen Near Americus," July 14, 1956; *Ibid.*, *Time*, "Embattled Fellowship Farm," September 17, 1956, 79-80; *Ibid.*, *Liberation*, "Crosses in Conflict in Southern Georgia," Dave Dellinger, December 1956; *Ibid.*, *The Nation*, "Courage in Action II: A Farm in Georgia," September 23, 1956.

its promulgation. Simultaneously, Americus's attempt to prevent "what happened to Albany and other places" from transpiring in the area failed as the city drew the attention of Civil Rights activists through its harassment of Koinonia.¹⁶² Inadvertently, the legal battles forced Koinonia to express its beliefs to the general public in a manner they had previously avoided and, in doing so, present themselves as a direct challenge to Southernism in the already tense post-*Brown* south.

"Rabid segregationists," who were intent on maintaining a (nonexistent) bloc of white solidarity against black inclusion saw in Koinonia the ultimate threat: a group of whites not only espousing integrationists' ideals, but actively practicing them.¹⁶³ Within a month of the first injunction against Koinonia, on July 23, 1956, "an explosive evidently tossed from a passing automobile" destroyed much of Koinonia's roadside market — where they sold surplus farm goods — and dealt an estimated \$3,500 in damages.¹⁶⁴ However, the "external community," invigorated by the mentioned coverage, sent supportive letters and gifts "from all over the continent" and provided the money needed to cover the expenses for repairing the market.¹⁶⁵

Concurrently, an economic boycott was enacted against Koinonia by business in Americus, and several surrounding cities, that eventually left Koinonians pondering "how long it will stand, and how long we can stand."¹⁶⁶ State Farm cancelled the insurance policy Koinonia held with the company, and the remaining insurance providers that covered sundry farm

¹⁶² SOHP, Interview with Warren Fortson, Disc One & Two.

¹⁶³ Chappell, *Inside Agitators*, xxiii.

¹⁶⁴ ATR, "Store Dynamited Here Last Night," July 24, 1956, 1 & 8; KFVI, *Washington Post*, "Bi-Racial Farm Project Blasted," July 25, 1956; Ibid., *Communal Enterprise*, "Blast Rocks Interracial Store Building," July 24, 1956.

¹⁶⁵ K'Meyer, *Interracialism*, 99; KP AP, no. 6.Ai)a) The Cowles Collection, Koinonia Newsletter, September 24, 1956;

¹⁶⁶ KP AP, no. 6.Ai)a) The Cowles Collection, Koinonia Newsletter, September 24, 1956.

equipment, buildings, and supplies, quickly followed suit, leaving the farm to handle current and impending damages themselves.¹⁶⁷ With tensions mounting to a near palpable level, Koinonia braced itself to contend with unexpected costs — whether through natural wear-and-tear or, as would be the case, continued violence.

The continued existence of Koinonia, and its refusal to amend its ideologies, incurred an escalation in the extralegal and illegal actions taken against the community. Before the year was through, the roadside market was again attacked, this time with a blast from a shotgun that destroyed a refrigerated meat case located within it, the farm's gas pump was “drilled with four rounds of steel-jacketed bullets,” and many of Koinonia's homes, as well as its entrance sign, were “riddled with rifle fire.”¹⁶⁸ As debt from damages rapidly escalated, the Citizens Bank of Americus — ignoring fourteen years of transactions with Jordan — led a new wave of businesses, ranging from the Still Gas Company to the local feed-store, to refuse dealings with Koinonia in hopes of destabilizing it enough that foreclosure or relocation would be the only option left for the farm.¹⁶⁹

The purportedly volunteer boycott was proven to be anything but after Herbert Birdsey, a businessman based in Macon, offered to open his seed store to Koinonia.¹⁷⁰ After being accused of selling to “the Communist down here” by an unidentified caller, Birdsey's fortunes took a turn for the worse.¹⁷¹ His store in Americus was bombed with enough dynamite to damage nearby

¹⁶⁷ Notice of Cancellation from Cotton States Insurance Company, June 4, 1956, CLJ MC 2341:4:13; KFVI, *Liberation*, “Crosses in Conflict in Southern Georgia,” Dave Dellinger, December 1956; KP AP, no. 6.Ai)a) The Cowles Collection, Koinonia Newsletter, November 1, 1959.

¹⁶⁸ Auchmutey, *The Class of '65*, 41; Lee, *Cotton Patch*, 106, 128-129.

¹⁶⁹ KFVI, *Newsweek*, “Every Man's Land – Or a No Man's Land?” February 25, 1957; KP AP, Farm Newsletter, August 24 1956; *Ibid.*, November 23, 1956; *Ibid.*, September 24, 1956.

¹⁷⁰ K'Meyer, *Interracialism*, 93-94.

¹⁷¹ Auchmutey, *The Class of '65*, 49.

buildings like the Sumter County Courthouse and the Citizen's Bank, and sent a clear message of what to expect should business with Koinonia continue.¹⁷² The aftereffect of the bombing resulted in not only Birdsey's cessation of business with the farm, but coerced other owners in the area to emulate his example — a trend that continued until nearly the end of the next year, when a local white merchant informed the Koinonians "I've stood this boycott about as long as I can."¹⁷³

Antagonists in Sumter County welcomed 1957 with a fresh wave of violence against Koinonia, choosing the roadside market yet again for the first attack of the new year. In the evening hours of January 14th Koinonia received a phone call from Sherriff Fred Chappell "that the roadside market had been bombed again."¹⁷⁴ Racing to the scene, Jordan and Harry Atkinson witnessed what was left of the market quickly burning away as "about 40 white people, including officers and state patrolmen" watched in muted silence.¹⁷⁵ Disheartened by the repeated attacks on the market, Koinonia chose to abandon the enterprise until hostilities ceased, writing in its next newsletter:

"We have decided, at least for the time being, not to clean up the wreckage, but to leave it beside the highway as a mute testimony to passerby of the fruits of hate and prejudice."¹⁷⁶

The loss of the market under such conditions erased any doubts of how leading whites in Sumter County, and the general population, felt about the continued presence of Koinonia in the area.¹⁷⁷

¹⁷² ATR, "A Shocking Episode," May 20, 1957; Ibid., "mysterious Blast Breaks Three Store Fronts Here," May 20, 1957.

¹⁷³ KP AP, no. 6.Ai)a) The Cowles Collection, Koinonia Newsletter, September 15, 1958.

¹⁷⁴ Lee, *Cotton Patch*, 116-117.

¹⁷⁵ KP AP, no. 6.Ai)a) The Cowles Collection, Koinonia Newsletter, January 18, 1957.

¹⁷⁶ Ibid.

¹⁷⁷ K'Meyer, *Interracialism*, 85-86.

Exacerbating the situation, the state of Georgia levied its own two-pronged attack against Koinonia in attempt to hasten its dissolution. First, it “reversed its earlier ruling that Koinonia was a non-profit organization and imposed taxes, retroactive taxes for five years.”¹⁷⁸ A particularly underhanded measure, the reclassification listed each Koinonian as a distinct business owner and required filing of individual income tax returns under the self-employed bracket.¹⁷⁹ Jordan vehemently opposed this action, and wrote the Internal Revenue Services (IRS) a detailed history of Koinonia to “indicate the non-profit nature of our activities,” before concluding that the government could no more tax Koinonia than it could a monastery.¹⁸⁰

The second attempt by Georgia against Koinonia was of a more familiar nature. Reviving suspicions of clandestine activities, *The State of Georgia v. C. Conrad Brown*, coinciding with GBI investigations, attempted to immolate Koinonia by elucidating its communist ties.¹⁸¹ The inquiry into Koinonia’s history, affiliates, supporters, members, and goals was nothing more than a façade enabling an inspection of the “haven” of societal dissenters, but worked to incite added local opposition to the farm through allegations that black employees were pseudo-slaves, “brain-washed” and exploited “without pay.”¹⁸² There were, of course, no substantiated findings that could be used legally condemn Koinonia, so the investigative body opted to publish its “findings” in the *Americus-Times Recorder* since judicial action would be impossible. Spewing libel, the report accused Koinonia of appropriating and perverting Christianity, amassing

¹⁷⁸ KFVI, *Liberation*, “Crosses in Conflict in Southern Georgia,” Dave Dellinger, December 1956.

¹⁷⁹ KP AP, no. Aiii)a)I) Clarence’s Transcripts + Other Writings, Letter Addressed to Mr. R. F. Faircloth, Dated October 21, 1963.

¹⁸⁰ KP AP, no. Aiii)a)I) Clarence’s Transcripts + Other Writings, Correspondence with IRS (1960s?).

¹⁸¹ K’Meyer, *Interracialism*, 90.

¹⁸² KP AP, Farm Newsletter, April 24, 1957; Subpoena to Jordan, March 26, 1957, CLJ MC 2341:4:15; Jordan to T. Howard and Marion Johnson, March 29, 1957, CLJ MC 756:4:5; “Koinonia Farm,” July 8, 1957, CLJ MC 2340:29:9; ATR, “Sumter County Grand Jury Presentments on Koinonia,” April 5, 1957, 1.

fortunes for its white leaders, and disseminating communist propaganda abroad while indoctrinating its members.¹⁸³

With “no expectation of police protection,” and attacks so routine that some members merely remarked “looks like they’re shooting at us again” instead of seeking cover, Jordan decided it was time to appeal to a higher authority than the local sheriff.¹⁸⁴ In January of 1957 a letter was drafted to President Dwight Eisenhower imploring him for assistance by succinctly stating:

“A community of nearly sixty men, women and children is facing annihilation unless quick, decisive action is taken by someone in authority... [because] every know measure of legal and economic pressure has been directed against us.”¹⁸⁵

The response, from President Eisenhower’s Attorney General, Herbert Brownell, stated, disappointingly, that the issue had been brought to the attention of the Department of Justice, but that “the maintenance of law and order rests on state and local authorities.”¹⁸⁶ Thus Koinonia was left to continue struggling under not only the physical attacks, but the verbal ones levied by local law enforcement that blamed Koinonians for staging the violent attacks, and contacting media outlets before the police, to elicit outside support.¹⁸⁷

In a similar vein, Jordan had already contacted one of his long-time Civil Rights associates, Martin Luther King, Jr., for advice on how to procure insurance. With damages

¹⁸³ Lee, *Cotton Patch*, 131-142. It is interesting to note that, in aligning with blacks and supporting progressive ideals, the typically reserved accusation of Communist association is levied against a predominately white group. For further reading on this trend see Jeff Woods, *Black Struggle, Red Scare: Segregation and Anti-Communism in the South, 1948-1968* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 2004)

¹⁸⁴ KP AP, no. 6.Ai)a) The Cowles Collection, Koinonia Newsletter, May 15, 1958; Auchmutey, *The Class of '65*, 44.

¹⁸⁵ KP AP, no. Aiii)a)I) Clarence’s Transcripts + Other Writings, Letter Addressed to President Dwight Eisenhower, January 22, 1957.

¹⁸⁶ *Ibid.*, Letter from Attorney General Herbert Brownell to Clarence Jordan, February 28, 1957.

¹⁸⁷ Lee, *Cotton Patch*, 114-18; K’Meyer, *Interracialism*, 87.

compounding, and insurance companies in and around Sumter County refusing business, Jordan hoped that King would be able to direct him to a more progressive-minded insurer that would be willing to do business with Koinonia.¹⁸⁸ This attempt proved more successful, as King responded in the affirmative and suggested Koinonia “contact Mr. Alexander and Company in Atlanta... and have him make direct contact with Lloyds of London” with whom King was insured.¹⁸⁹

One would be remiss to ignore the actions of the Ku Klux Klan in Sumter County during this period, as they were key actors in the area. Concentrating its efforts on Koinonia, the KKK executed extralegal and illegal plans that were designed to both intimidate members of the farm and those residing in the area that might try to assist the Koinonians — effectively creating a façade of pseudo-solidarity amongst whites in Sumter County. The KKK remained the primary suspect for most of the attacks endured by Koinonia throughout the 1950s, but officially it was only proven to have had two peaceful, albeit threatening, meetings with Koinonia.¹⁹⁰ The second meeting, occurring in February of 1957, wrought more damage to the segregationist cause in the area than it did to the intended target: Koinonia.

Approximately “150 men and women from all over southern Georgia... gathered in white robes and peaked hoods” for a Klan rally at the Americus fairgrounds to protest, among the predictable issues, the “white men on the inside who are fighting the Negro’s cause for money.”¹⁹¹ After concluding their meeting, the Klansmen disrobed and “formed a 70-car

¹⁸⁸ Auchmutey, *The Class of '65*, 47.

¹⁸⁹ KP AP, no. 2. Aiii)a) Clarence Jordan, Letter from Martin Luther King to Clarence Jordan, February 8, 1957.

¹⁹⁰ Mentioned in Chapter One, the first interaction occurred shortly after Koinonia was founded. This initial contact, incited by Jordan and England eating with hired blacks, and subsequent contacts, were nothing more than attempts at outright intimidation of the Koinonians that dared challenge the South’s racial-quo.

¹⁹¹ Lee, *Cotton Patch*, 123-124; K'Meyer, *Interracialism*, 87.

motorcade” to drive to Koinonia.¹⁹² The Klan intended to “arrange a sale of the bi-racial agricultural undertaking” peacefully, but unintentionally drew the attention of the press nationwide with one of the largest car cavalcades the South had yet witnessed.¹⁹³ Arriving at the farm, three Klan leaders exited their vehicle to address the Koinonians and proposed the liquidation of the commune.¹⁹⁴

Norman Long, one of the Koinonians present for the offer, recalled that the “Klansmen wanted to know if we would be interested in selling out,” and “suggest[ing] that was the only way to end the trouble” that had plagued Koinonia over the preceding six months.¹⁹⁵ Margaret Wittkamper, the first to speak to the Klansmen, confirmed Long’s account, adding that the visitors were irked their demand to be taken “to you leader” was dismissed by her on the grounds that all members were considered absolute equals.¹⁹⁶ The farm’s refusal to acquiesce to the KKK’s offer seemed to strengthen the resolve of whites opposed to Koinonia, and subsequent escalating violence, alongside intensified boycotting, began spilling over into the lives of those who supported the commune directly or indirectly.

Local whites that were sympathetic towards Koinonia suffered similar harassments as its members at the hands of those attempting to force the dissolution of the farm. Said reprisals were enacted for various reasons — most of which pointed to a breach in the white monolith Americus was desperately attempting to present — but unashamedly targeted supporters regardless of age,

¹⁹² KFVI, *Spartanburg Herald-Journal*, “Offer to Sell Koinonia: Biracial Farm Chiefs Meet with Klan,” February 1957.

¹⁹³ Ibid., *San Francisco Chronicle*, “Klan Seeks Bi-Racial Farm Sale,” February 1957; Ibid., Newspaper Clipping titled “Meeting Peaceful: Klan Seeks to Buy Biracial Ga. Farm,” February 1957.

¹⁹⁴ Auchmutey, *The Class of '65*, 48-49.

¹⁹⁵ KFVI, *New York Post*, “Georgia Interracial Farm Holds Firm, Defies KKK,” February 1957.

¹⁹⁶ KP AP, Farm Newsletter, March 9, 1957; KP TC, no. CJ58F, Interview with Margaret Whittkamper, June 12, 1989.

background, or level of involvement. Just days after the roadside market was destroyed, Jack Singletary, “who was to accompany them on a previously planned business trip to Atlanta,” had two attempted arson attempts on “his large barn in which were stored his tractors, combine, fertilizer, feed and seed.”¹⁹⁷ Even clergy were expected to emulate the bellicosity, and those who failed to do so found their presence unwelcome. Reverend Paul Ritch was forced from town by his congregation after he drove a recently assaulted Koinonian home from Americus, eliciting a demand for his resignation “for allowing himself to get mixed up in the situation.”¹⁹⁸ Similarly, whites whose greatest transgression was verbal support or defense of the commune endured retaliation that crippled, if not terminated, their presence and power in Americus.

Warren Fortson, mentioned in the previous chapter, serves as the best example of this. Having met, and aligned, with Koinonia, Fortson quickly lost his position as county attorney, and lucrative law practice, as whites in Americus refused business with him in a coercive attempt to force his relocation.¹⁹⁹ By 1965 this trend of expelling like-minded whites had resulted in the departure of “two-thirds of [Koinonia’s] white friends,” under coercive threat.²⁰⁰

Bearing the worst brunt of local antagonism, local blacks that associated with Koinonia were in even more danger than like-minded whites. Actions taken against this group of supporters were framed within the racial violence that permeated the 1950s and 1960s, and left African-American supporters weary of how far opponents of Koinonia were willing to go to isolate it. Those that contradicted the façade that “negroes in the community don’t talk about the

¹⁹⁷ KP AP, no. 6.Ai)a) The Cowles Collection, Koinonia Newsletter, January 18, 1957.

¹⁹⁸ Ibid., Koinonia Newsletter, May 15, 1958.

¹⁹⁹ SOHP, Interview with Warren Fortson

²⁰⁰ KP AP, no. 6.Ai)a) The Cowles Collection, Koinonia Newsletter, November, 1965.

farm,” or “think about it,” faced cross-burnings and property destruction as early-warnings, and violence if open support continued.²⁰¹

Where the KKK did not officially claim responsibility for the actions taken against Koinonia’s white supporters, it proudly declared itself guilty of the terroristic acts perpetrated against blacks.²⁰² “A six foot cross was burned” at the home of a “Negro tenant worker,” and a tenant house “was destroyed by a mysterious blaze” within days of each other in February of 1957.²⁰³ The Angry family, who “had been living at Koinonia since 1954,” were forced to relocate the same year, as threats of violence against them resulted in Koinonia’s members sending “the family on a vacation” until tensions subsided.²⁰⁴ Similar occurrences around Sumter County left only a handful of blacks, that Koinonia was “dependent upon, and thankful for,” like Carranza Morgan and Annie Bell Jackson, who helped the commune survive through their (largely) surreptitious obtainment and proffering of supplies.²⁰⁵

Though Koinonia continued to tenaciously cling to its existence, with the help of supporters both near and far, those opposed to the egalitarian experiment were just as obstinately dedicated to dissolving it. As the overt violent reprisals abated, following the mentioned in-town bombing of a sympathetic feed store, a new wave of caustic barrages hit the Koinonians. The economic boycott reached its apex and forced the commune to travel thirty-plus miles just to receive medical care, members endured a level of stigmatization that few whites ever

²⁰¹ KFVI, *Sunday Ledger-Enquirer*, “Koinonia Bi-Racial Farm Stirring Violence, Strong Opinions in Sumter,” February 17, 1957.

²⁰² O’Connor, “A Rural Georgia Tragedy,” 50.

²⁰³ KFVI, *Sunday Ledger-Enquirer*, “Koinonia Bi-Racial Farm Stirring Violence, Strong Opinions in Sumter,” February 17, 1957.

²⁰⁴ K’Meyer, *Interracialism*, 114.

²⁰⁵ KP AP, no. 6.Ai)a) The Cowles Collection, Koinonia Newsletter, November, 1965; Kay N. Weiner, *Koinonia Remembered: The First Fifty Years* (Americus: A Koinonia Publication, 1992), 43-46, 51-53.

experienced, and continued pressure from whites in Sumter County drove many Koinonians to leave just to protect their children.²⁰⁶

The bombing of Birdsey's store became "a backfire for the boycott" and Americus as, in the aftermath, Birdsey decided to "close his Americus franchise" and move his business elsewhere."²⁰⁷ Likewise, because of the media attention given the incident, "plan[s] to secure contracts with northern manufactures," like the Marlette Coach Company, quickly devolved from "tentative agreement[s]" to cancelled plans.²⁰⁸ In light of this, and hoping to prevent further loss of monies for Americus and Sumter County, "a committee of ten leading citizens" arranged a meeting with Jordan to discuss what had now become for them an internecine issue.²⁰⁹

The gathering, "held in the Jordan's living room at Koinonia," began with Frank Myers (president of the Chamber of Commerce) stating "we have a problem which we've got to recognize; we can't be like an ostrich with its head in the sand."²¹⁰ Unfortunately, the hopes of finally finding resolution were dashed as Myers, and the other men with him, quickly couched the "message as a moral appeal" and requested Koinonia leave Sumter County for the betterment of its denizens and cities.²¹¹ After the committee attempted to implicate Koinonia as the cause of the violence in the area, and to argue that there were no supporters of the endeavor remaining, Jordan retorted simply: "it's hard to tell... how much peoples' feelings are hidden by fear. Before all this terrorism started, I had a feeling of friendship with all of you in here."²¹²

²⁰⁶ KP AP, no. 6.Ai)a) The Cowles Collection, Koinonia Newsletter, Septemeber 15, 1958; BRL RF, CC, "Koinonia Updated," October 13, 1976.

²⁰⁷ Lee, *Cotton Patch*, 146.

²⁰⁸ O'Connor, "A Rural Georgia Tragedy," 64-65.

²⁰⁹ Tuck, *Beyond Atlanta*, 177.

²¹⁰ Lee, *Cotton Patch*, 146-147.

²¹¹ Auchmutey, *The Class of '65*, 50-51.

²¹² Lee, *Cotton Patch*, 151.

The meeting was concluded after Koinonians proposed setting up “an impartial panel to hear the facts of the case,” comprised of members picked by both Koinonia and the citizens of Americus.²¹³ The community leaders present rejected the idea on the premise that “no one outside of Georgia could understand the situation in the South,” and repeated the reasoning when Jordan proposed limiting the members to peoples based in Georgia that would be familiar with the occurrences that had transpired in Sumter County.”²¹⁴ While there was no official progress made in the relationship between Koinonia and Americus at the conclusion of the meeting, “word apparently went out to the Klan and its ilk that further terrorism would not be tolerated” in area — if for no other reason than to avoid inadvertently harming the industrialization of Sumter County.²¹⁵

The stigmatization of Koinonia was not reversed, however, despite the near-cessation of violence. As three of Koinonia’s teenagers, Lora Browne, Jan Jordan, and Bill Wittkamper discovered in 1960, just because “they [Americus residents] are either ignoring us or tolerating us” does not mean they have forgotten or forgiven the perceived trespasses of Koinonia.²¹⁶ After applying to the Americus High School, each of the named children were refused admittance, despite “good scholastic and deportment records,” “for the best interests of all concerned” according to the city board.²¹⁷ For the first time, Koinonians considered legal action for a wrong and, after much deliberation, agreed that discrimination on this level against “their religious and social beliefs” warranted judicial action.²¹⁸

²¹³ K'Meyer, *Interracialism*, 94.

²¹⁴ Lee, *Cotton Patch*, 154.

²¹⁵ Auchmutey, *The Class of '65*, 51-52; BRL RF, CC, “Koinonia Updated,” October 13, 1976.

²¹⁶ BRL RF, *Atlanta Journal and Constitution*, “Americus Project Survives: 26 Years Defying Klan,” January 26, 1969.

²¹⁷ KP AP, no. 6.Ai)a) The Cowles Collection, Koinonia Newsletter, September 20, 1960.

²¹⁸ Lee, *Cotton Patch*, 161.

Calling on the American Civil Liberties Union, after an unsuccessful attempt at appealing the decision locally, Koinonia filed its first lawsuit.²¹⁹ Held in Macon's federal district court under William Bootle, the presiding judge, an answer was demanded for why the only children rejected by Americus High were the Koinonian teenagers. The only answer provided by the defense was that the decision was a preemptive one designed to prevent a potentially "explosive situation."²²⁰ In response, Bootle ruled that "equal protection of the law was due all applying students" and forced Americus High to redress its earlier decision.²²¹

In a similar undertaking, "as the boycott tightened around Koinonia," suffocating its industry and revenue, the commune "turned to their friends with influence in the government" to assuage the situation.²²² Knowing that many local business, from seed stores to gas suppliers, had some sort of contract with the federal government and thus prohibited from discrimination, Koinonia decided:

"If they have any good or service that are offered to the general public and which we need, we shall feel free to purchase them in a quiet and orderly way. If refused, we shall make no scene or argument... [but] return as often as we might have need."²²³

Though demonstrations and protest were still avoided, the process of repeatedly and politely coming to a business worked to erode the strength of the boycott. Simultaneously, figures like Eleanor Roosevelt, who were sympathetic to Koinonia's plight, encouraged the dissolution of the boycott by the end of the 1960s.²²⁴

²¹⁹ Auchmutey, *The Class of '65*, 60.

²²⁰ O'Connor, "A Rural Georgia Tragedy," 82-83.

²²¹ Auchmutey, *The Class of '65*, 61; Lee, *Cotton Patch*, 162-163.

²²² K'Meyer, *Interracialism*, 106.

²²³ KP AP, no. 6.Ai)a) The Cowles Collection, Koinonia Newsletter, November, 1959.

²²⁴ Auchmutey, *The Class of '65*, 47.

The end of the boycott marked little more than a superficial shift in the relationship between much of Sumter County and Koinonia, signifying a turn toward more subtle resentment. Vendors opened their stores to Koinonians, once more selling their goods to the ostracized group, but did so because they were coerced and they needed to stymie the bad publicity Americus was receiving over the debacle. Resentment lingered in Americus especially, and Koinonians continued to experience little more than bitter toleration from much of the white population there.

This response should bear little surprise in light of Koinonia's formative years. Firmly rooted in Southern tradition through both its agrarian focus and Biblical grounding, the commune was initially looked at as a strange, but acceptable, part of the white community. The greatest initial hesitation stemmed from the socialism practiced by its members, and even that generated little concern until McCarthyism's reign of paranoia was unleashed in full force on the nation in the late 1940s and early 1950s. Thus, Koinonia's first several years were ones of relative peace as the farm nestled itself into the white community of Sumter County.

Fostering goodwill and becoming an "insider" in the region remained a paramount goal for Jordan and the other members, although their chief focus remained advancing the society they were engaging with. Said drive motivated Koinonians to constantly look for means by which they could elevate the poor around them, and in the Deep South this meant a primary focus on aiding blacks. With both opportunity and resources present, Koinonia emerged as a hub of social progressivism in Sumter County through its sundry outreaches — separating itself from the white liberal movement with its unique grassroots approach that focused on catalyzing a willing inward shift rather than one forced by external pressure.

In so following this methodology, the commune experienced a rapid transition from insider to outsider in the white community. The excommunication of Koinonians from Rehoboth Baptist Church, and their ban from other white churches in the area, in 1950, remains the earliest and clearest example of this shift, but its intimations can be traced for several years prior to this date. While the date that this move began is important, what should be noted is what it reveals. This swing from acceptance to virulence elucidates the indelible impact of Koinonia in the local community, and the rapidity of it smacks of feelings of betrayal on the part other whites. Expecting the Koinonians to at least acquiesce, if not conform, to the mores of the white community that had welcomed them less than a decade earlier, their refusal elicited an extreme response from the white population that felt their way of life was under attack not only from external forces but from internal dissidents.

What then followed was a process of stigmatization that, at its apotheosis, left Koinonia under siege from nearby whites. The extreme response leads one to question why such a transformation occurred, and Gerhard Falk provides part of the answer. Koinonia, through its progressive actions, earned what Falk labeled an “achieved stigma” and, duly branded by its conduct and intentional divergence, was quickly relegated to the fringes of society.²²⁵

Even from its periphery position Koinonia steadfastly worked to promote peaceful progress. More importantly, Koinonians retained their uniqueness by refusing to be assimilated into roles as activists in Sumter County. The commune voiced support for the goals of both the Americus and Albany Movements, as well as the larger Civil Rights Movement, but disagreed with the methods each followed — especially as peaceful demonstrations yielded to intentionally

²²⁵ Gerhard Falk, *Stigma: How We Treat Outsiders* (New York: Prometheus Books, 2001), 11, 17, 22. Falk makes the argument that there are two distinct stigmas ascribed to peoples – those earned via the recipient’s intentional actions and those earned via means outside the bearer’s control. Of the two, Falk argues that earned stigmas often generate a more extreme response.

provocative civil disobedience. Effectively skirting the white liberal movement, Koinonia retained its agency by fostering improvement in race relations independently, sincerely, and unwaveringly.

It was this dedication to adhering to their foundational tenets that enabled Koinonia to survive the Americus Movement, and thereafter to set itself apart as a bastion of egalitarianism. In 1976, just over a decade after the Americus Movement ended, Koinonia founded one of the most impactful outreaches in the modern world: Habitat for Humanity. Those familiar with the commune's story can see in its ministry the continued effort to effect positive change for the less fortunate in a nondiscriminatory manner free of politicization.

It is plain then to see that not only did Koinonians act successfully as social progressives during the tumultuous mid-twentieth century period, but they did so to such a degree that other whites felt the only course of action left to them was to enact oppressive and violent measures against those affiliated with the farm. Furthermore, in this overintense response one may see the fragility of the purported white monolith in the South as even the slightest crack in its foundation sent Chappell's "rapid segregationists" into a frenzy. Koinonia's role in Sumter County, both before and after the Americus Movement, was immeasurable as both a progressive influence on local whites and an invigorating bulwark for blacks.

REFERENCES

Abbreviations

CLJ MC	Clarence Leonard Jordan Manuscript
KPAP	Koinonia Partners Archived Papers
KPTC	Koinonia Partners Tape Collection
KFVI	Koinonia Farm Vol I
ATR	<i>Americus Times Recorder</i>
CC	<i>The Christian Century</i>
SOHP	Sumter Oral History Project
CRVM	Civil Rights Movement Veterans
BRL RF	Blackshear Regional Library, Research File SC-VF 975.8913

Archives and Collections

Blackshear Regional Library, Sumter County, Americus
Microfilm Collection
Research Files

Civil Rights Movement Veterans

Georgia Government Documentation Project

Koinonia Partners, Americus
Koinonia Partners Archived Papers
Koinonia Partners Tape Collection

Hargrett Rare Book and Manuscript Library, University of Georgia Libraries, Athens
Clarence Jordan Papers

Harry S. Truman Presidential Library

Library of Congress

Martin Luther King, Jr. Research and Education Institute, Stanford University
Online Collections

New Georgia Encyclopedia

PBS Online Archive
Special Features, Primary Sources

Southern Oral History Program Collection

Sumter Oral History Project, Georgia Southwestern State University

United States Census

University of Mississippi Library Digital Collections
Freedom Rider Oral Histories

Periodicals and Magazines

Americus Times Recorder

Atlanta Constitution

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