“One Doesn’t Integrate on Sunday”: The Creation of the Human Relations Council and the Origins of Desegregation in Anniston, Alabama, 1961–1963

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IN APRIL 1963, MARTIN LUTHER KING JR. and the Southern Christian Leadership Conference (SCLC) commenced Project X in the city of Birmingham—a campaign designed to desegregate downtown businesses, open various public spaces to African Americans, and establish fair hiring practices in the “most segregated city in America.” For an entire month, protests engulfed the heart of the Magic City, as adults and children marched through the streets, weathering the fire hoses and dogs unleashed by Police Commissioner Bull Connor. On May 7, after much arm twisting and back-channel negotiating by the Kennedy administration, and after “representatives of the service and consumer economy” had finally tired of the chaos and loss of revenue, the SCLC and the city reached a settlement, handing King and his associates a hard-fought victory.¹

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¹Martin Luther King Jr., *Why We Can't Wait* (New York, 1964), 43; Numan V. Bartley, *The New South, 1945–1980* (Baton Rouge, 1995), 336. There are several excellent studies on the Birmingham movement. See Glenn T. Eskew, *But for Birmingham: The Local and National Movements in the Civil Rights Struggle* (Chapel Hill, N.C., 1997); Aldon D. Morris, *The Origins of the Civil Rights Movement: Black Communities Organizing for Change* (New York, 1984), 250–74; Taylor Branch, *Parting the Waters: America in the King Years, 1954–63* (New York, 1988), 673–802; Adam Fairclough, *To Redeem the Soul of America: The Southern Christian Leadership Conference and Martin Luther King, Jr.* (Athens, Ga., 1987), 111–39; J. Mills Thornton, *Dividing Lines: Municipal Politics and the Struggle for Civil Rights in Montgomery, Birmingham, and Selma* (Tuscaloosa, 2002), 141–379; and Robert Gaines Corley, “The Quest for Racial Harmony: Race Relations in Birmingham, Alabama, 1947–1963” (PhD diss., University of Virginia, 1979).

Repercussions followed. On the evening of May 11, two bombs were detonated in Birmingham, one at the residence of King's brother, Rev. A. D. King, and another outside the A. G. Gaston Motel, where Martin Luther King Jr. had been staying. Both were obvious attempts to assassinate the embattled and much-reviled civil rights leader. Blacks in the city responded with bricks, bottles, and fire, venting their anger upon the police and anyone else who got in the way. Fed up with the situation in Alabama, President Kennedy ordered three thousand soldiers from Fort Benning, Georgia, into the state. They arrived at Fort McClellan in Anniston a few hours past sunset on Mother's Day, May 12. Kennedy intended to send the troops into Birmingham right away and establish firm control over problem areas, but city leaders urged him to wait. Meanwhile, the troops sat outside of Anniston, waiting for deployment orders. According to Attorney General Robert Kennedy, they would remain there until "the situation [was] stabilized."²

At approximately the same time that troop carriers from Fort Benning were rolling toward their hometown, Klan members Kenneth Adams and William "Red" Boyd were taking a drive through Anniston, shotguns across their laps, looking to contribute to the unfolding drama in central Alabama. They forced a car containing two African American women and their children to the shoulder of Highway 202. Boyd jumped out and fired a single pistol round over the roof of the women's car, while Adams "ordered them to turn around and head the other way." The terrified women did as they were told. Later in the afternoon, Adams and Boyd drove into a black neighborhood in west Anniston and sprayed the front of two homes with buckshot. Next, they sped over to St. John's Methodist Church and did the same.³

It was a scenario that had become all too familiar in Anniston. Ever since the *Brown v. Board of Education* decision in 1954, service station owner Kenneth Adams and a small coterie of white supremacists had

²Eskew, *But for Birmingham*, 229–305; *Anniston Star*, May 13, 1963; *Birmingham News*, May 12 and 13, 1963.

³Federal Bureau of Investigations, Case File: Kenneth Lamar Adams, file number 157-924 (referred to hereafter as "Adams FBI File"), acquired by the author through a Freedom of Information Act request; *Anniston Star*, May 13 and 20, 1963.

habitually employed violence and orchestrated mayhem to maintain the sacred color line. In April 1956, Adams and two other men attacked singer Nat “King” Cole onstage at the Birmingham Municipal Auditorium in a futile attempt to protect white teenagers from what they considered the degenerative influence of black music. On Mother’s Day 1961, Adams and members of his west Anniston Klavern attacked and burned a Greyhound bus carrying members of the Congress of Racial Equality (CORE)—the original Freedom Riders—who were in the South testing a recent Supreme Court decision that banned segregated facilities along interstate routes. Several of the passengers were beaten as they exited the burning vehicle. Adams and eight fellow conspirators were subsequently arrested and charged with the destruction of a motor vehicle engaged in interstate commerce, but only one of the attackers ever served any jail time. The charges against Adams were dropped due to a lack of evidence.⁴

That Adams and his associates had escaped meaningful punishment in these and other incidents was not uncommon. Throughout the civil rights era, southern lawmen and white juries refused to punish those who lashed out at African Americans and their allies, leaving them with little or no legal protection. Men like Adams reveled in such neglect, becoming more brazen with each undeterred crime. It seemed that Adams’s transgressions, if not wholeheartedly accepted, were at least tolerated by much of the white community. He lent decisive action to the rhetoric of white supremacy and gained a large working class following because of it. Sometimes Adams’s zealotry drew specific criticism from the business and industrial class, but such muscle power and raw action were deemed necessary for the perpetuation of the status quo. Indeed, the leadership class seemed to encourage such action with their silence and unwillingness to punish racial crimes. As a member of the white elite intimated to Anne Braden in the 1930s, “we have to have a good lynching every once in

⁴For information on the Cole attack, see Brian Ward, *Just My Soul Responding: Rhythm and Blues, Black Consciousness, and Race Relations* (Berkeley, Calif., 1998), 95–105, and Gary S. Sprayberry, “‘Interrupted Melody’: The 1956 Attack on Nat ‘King’ Cole,” *Alabama Heritage* 71 (Winter 2004), 16–24. For an in depth examination of the Freedom Rides, see Raymond Arsenault, *Freedom Riders: 1961 and the Struggle for Racial Justice* (New York, 2006).

while to keep the nigger in his place.” Such a rare glimpse into the mindset of the wealthier class points to definite similarities between how they and the likes of Kenneth Adams viewed race. In 1956, the publisher of the *Anniston Star*, Harry Mell Ayers, whose own attitudes toward race and class have been called “progressive” and “liberal” by scholars, laid bare his own feelings about African Americans at the annual meeting of the American Society of Newspaper Editors. He said that “Negroes are dirty, are unreliable, are liars,” and that the “consuming desire of every Negro is to possess a white woman.” If such opinions were representative of Anniston’s white elite, there appeared to be very little that separated them from men like Adams. The difference resided in the applications of these principles. Whereas members of the elite might confine their opinions to private conversations, demonstrating more caution with their words and deeds, Adams and his ilk operated in the bright light of public scrutiny. In fact, ever since the late nineteenth century, such men had served as segregation’s armed might, safeguarding the city and its traditions against perceived radicalism, outside interference, and black activism. In return, they received the better jobs and housing, and were even afforded a tiny, shrill political voice. It was an uneasy, unspoken relationship built upon the twin principles of noblesse oblige and accommodation, and it bound together the wealthy and poor whites of Anniston. By taking a violent midnight ride through a black neighborhood, Adams was simply fulfilling his end of the bargain, whether consciously or not.⁵

Following the May 1963 shooting incidents and the dramatic events in Birmingham, however, the elite could no longer afford to turn a blind eye to the violence. Adams and other extremists were soiling the town’s image—which had already taken a beating with the 1961 Freedom Ride bus attack—and were perhaps scaring away prospective investors and entrepreneurs. Businessmen and factory

⁵ Anne Braden, *The Wall Between*, 2nd ed. (Knoxville, 1999), 25; Ayers quoted in Alice Fox Pitts, ed., *Problems of Journalism: Proceedings of the 1956 Convention of the American Society of Newspaper Editors* (Washington, D.C., 1956), 79–80. Anne Braden spent her formative years in Anniston. See also Catherine Fosl, *Subversive Southerner: Anne Braden and the Struggle for Racial Justice in the Cold War South* (New York, 2002).

owners were determined that Anniston would not turn into another Birmingham, where civil rights demonstrations had clogged the arteries of commerce, invited federal intervention, and created logistical nightmares for officials. The city would have to take unprecedented action to avoid such a dilemma. So in the spring and summer of 1963, city leaders, working in tandem with clergymen from the white and black communities, created a biracial committee, integrated the public library, and paved the way for the eventual desegregation of area schools and businesses.

Such actions have earned the city countless plaudits and a reputation for progressiveness over the years. According to most contemporary accounts, except for the 1961 Freedom Ride bus attack, Anniston remained relatively peaceful throughout the entire civil rights era and, in the words of one historian, experienced “little of the brutality unleashed on the civil rights movement in other cities.” Much of the credit for this supposed peace goes to the white elite, or the “knights of noblesse oblige,” as *Anniston Star* publisher Brandt Ayers has described them, whose creative leadership served to both undermine the Klan and implement the goals of the civil rights movement. “Hoping to avoid the violent clashes and bloodshed that had and were occurring elsewhere throughout the South,” writes historian Nan Woodruff, “Anniston’s white leaders sought a safer ground, by being willing to work across racial lines with black leaders to end segregation in their community.”⁶

These knights of noblesse oblige do deserve credit for initiating and shepherding desegregation efforts. After all, any attempts to bridge the racial divide, including the creation of a biracial committee, were construed as treasonous in the tense civil rights era. They could even prove dangerous. “It was a time when such a bland biracial proposal was tantamount to defaming the sacraments,” writes Ayers. “It was a step toward erasing the mutually understood social and legal line that had kept the two cultures apart.” But, in retrospect, how much credit can we accurately bestow upon the white elite for successfully

⁶Nan Woodruff, introduction to *Beyond the Burning Bus: The Civil Rights Revolution in a Southern Town*, by Phil Noble (Montgomery, 2003), 23; *Anniston Star*, July 10, 2005.

integrating the city? And what motivated such efforts? In his 2003 memoir *Beyond the Burning Bus*, Phil Noble, the former pastor of the First Presbyterian Church in Anniston, writes about the formation of the biracial committee, styled the Human Relations Council, and suggests that the threat of widespread demonstrations is what ultimately drove its white members to make certain concessions to the African American community. The black members “never voiced the threat that if certain things were not done, there would be demonstrations and/or boycotts,” he explains. “However, all members of the Council were keenly aware of the probability of such action unless reasonable progress was made. ‘How little can we give and still keep demonstrations and boycotts from happening’ might best summarize the attitude of the white members of the Council.” Following such logic, it is reasonable to conclude that if local black activists had not nudged them to take action, or if the threat of violence and demonstrations had not persuaded them to move away from a defense of segregation, white leaders would not have acted on their own. It took the example of the Birmingham crisis, the looming reminder of the 1961 Freedom Ride attack, and the fear of discord at home to convince members of the white power structure to commence the process of desegregation. Their actions can best be described as a triumph of pragmatism over idealism, for they did just enough, as we will see, to keep the federal government at bay and the demonstrations to a minimum.⁷

But such calculated maneuvering had always epitomized the white elite of Anniston. Ever since the city’s founding in 1872 as a private planned community, they had exerted tight control over its institutions and people. They owned the factories and prominent downtown shops, ran the media outlets, controlled the financial institutions, sat on the boards of various civic clubs, and maintained a firm grip on the affairs of local government. Paternalism guided their relationships with working class whites and blacks. In the early years, founders Samuel Noble and Daniel Tyler had provided town residents with low-cost housing, churches, schools, and above-average wages. In re-

⁷ *Anniston Star*, July 10, 2005; Noble, *Beyond the Burning Bus*, 103.

turn, they expected loyalty, deference, and productivity. Furthermore, because they were providing them with sustenance and employment, the elite expected black residents to know their rightful place and not challenge the prevailing racial order. "For white people, paternalism provided a self-congratulatory sense of generosity and superiority," writes historian Timothy Tyson. "For blacks, it supplied dribs and drabs of material sustenance—shoes and books and hand-me-down clothes for their children. Paternalism strengthened the system of white supremacy by softening its sharper edges and covering its patent injustices with a patina of friendship." Over the years, the elite's grip over the working class loosened, but its control over the city's financial and social institutions never wavered. Anniston's "very origins were rooted in adherence to a paternalistic power structure that treated its workers well," writes former *Anniston Star* reporter Dennis Love, "but made it clear from the beginning how the show was being run, and by whom." When the civil rights movement threatened to undermine their control of the city, the elite did what they had always done: they acted in their own self-interest. Rather than wait for racial turmoil to overwhelm them as it had their counterparts in Birmingham, they would make a preemptive strike against southern apartheid to ensure that they dictated the terms and controlled every important aspect of the desegregation process. In short, they reverted back to the industrial paternalism that had guided the hand of the elite ever since the late nineteenth century.⁸

On May 9, 1963, three days before the shotgun attacks by Kenneth Adams and William Boyd, the governing body, or Session, of the First Presbyterian Church of Anniston called a meeting to discuss regular church business. Toward the end of the proceedings, an older member of the congregation, E. L. Turner, described a recent

⁸Timothy B. Tyson, *Blood Done Sign My Name: A True Story* (New York, 2004), 25; Dennis Love, *My City Was Gone: One American Town's Toxic Secret, Its Angry Band of Locals, and a \$700 Million Day in Court* (New York, 2006), 66. For works on Anniston's history, see Grace Hooten Gates, *The Model City of the New South: Anniston, Alabama, 1872–1900* (Tuscaloosa, 1996); Julius Pinckney Hagerty Jr., "Early History of the Industrial City of Anniston, Alabama, 1872–1889" (master's thesis, Auburn University, 1960); and Gary S. Sprayberry, "'Town Among the Trees': Paternalism, Class, and Civil Rights in Anniston, Alabama, 1872 to Present" (PhD diss., University of Alabama, 2003).

visit to Birmingham, where he had witnessed some of the SCLC-led demonstrations and their impact upon the community. He urged the members of the Session to join together and pray “that Anniston be spared what Birmingham was experiencing.” The pastor of First Presbyterian, J. Phillips “Phil” Noble, agreed to lead the prayer but wondered what more could be done. After a protracted discussion, the Session voted to “urge the city commission to appoint a biracial committee,” writes Noble, which would open lines of communication between the white and black communities and prevent additional racial violence. On the morning of May 12, hours before Adams and Boyd began their Sunday afternoon drive, Noble and another minister, Alvin Bullen of Grace Episcopal Church, speaking from the pulpit, challenged city leaders to create such a committee. For several months, the two clergymen had been holding regular meetings with two prominent African American ministers, Nimrod Q. Reynolds of Seventeenth Street Baptist and William McClain of Haven Chapel Methodist Church, to discuss racial difficulties and seek ways to bridge the gulf between their respective communities. The idea for a biracial committee had emerged from these meetings. “There is an urgent need in [Anniston] for the active support of all of us toward providing a leadership group of the respected and intelligent citizens of Anniston, representatives of the best people of both races, to provide guidelines and direction,” Bullen told his parishioners. “For too long in our community little effort has been made to do these things. It seems that too many people have skirted the whole problem of race relations by ignoring it or by assuming that the ultimate solutions of it are to be found in the particular point of view held by an individual or group.” Noble agreed: “Trying to ignore the problem of the situation is like trying to ignore cancer.”⁹

The three men who would spearhead the city’s initial foray into desegregation—Noble, Reynolds, and McClain—were relative newcomers to the community. Noble, a native of Learned, Mississippi, and a graduate of Columbia Seminary in Decatur, Georgia, moved to Anniston in 1956 for the pastorate of First Presbyterian. Admit-

⁹ *Anniston Star*, May 13, 1963; Noble, *Beyond the Burning Bus*, 76.

tedly, Noble's first years in the pulpit were "ones of basic ministry," when a majority of the young minister's time was spent "preaching and interpreting the Word of God." He writes, "I found no special emphasis on race relations, nor any noticeable avoidance of the subject. Over and again the basic application of the Gospel was made to our attitudes and relationships to others, including toward the Negro race with whom Southern whites have been so inextricably bound up." Over time, as Noble became more comfortable in his position, his eyes opened to the myriad "problems faced by black people." He began to question the basic assumptions of the southern racial caste system. "Southern culture and society was what I breathed and lived. It was not that I accepted or rejected it," he writes. "I thought no more about it than the air I breathed." Local and national events, however, crowded in, working to undermine his traditional notions of race. In the early 1960s, Noble was elected to the board of directors of Stillman College, a historically black college in Tuscaloosa. It provided him with unprecedented opportunities to socialize with black administrators and faculty members in an informal setting. "Up to that time, I had not eaten at a table with a black person," he writes. "But I was given this special opportunity to have an experience that helped me grow out of my racial prejudice. I well remember how ambivalent I was at the time. I knew in my mind that it was right to be at the table with black people as equals, but I had to deal with my emotions or feelings. This was because of my having lived as long as I had in the segregated culture, unconsciously breathing in its attitudes." The 1961 bus burning horrified Noble, making him realize "Anniston had the capacity for racial violence that was equal to any other community in the South." He knew something had to be done. "The Christian faith required that we deal with these issues in the name of Christ," he writes, "for the sake of a people who had suffered unjustly for too long."¹⁰

While Noble viewed the events of the early 1960s with growing concern and empathy, but with the full knowledge "they were not directly part of my day-to-day existence," his counterparts in the African

¹⁰Noble, *Beyond the Burning Bus*, 33, 39–41, 48–49, and 52–55; *Anniston Star*, May 18, 1971.

American community had begun plotting the demise of Jim Crow. William B. McClain writes, "I was determined to challenge this way of living in Anniston and anywhere else I was segregated and treated as inferior. I was determined to spend the rest of my life, if necessary, working, preaching, teaching, marching, writing, being arrested, and doing whatever I could do or had to do to change this racial arrangement. I would accept this inferior role and this dehumanizing segregated system no longer!" The twenty-four-year-old McClain had only been in Anniston a few months. Before manning the pulpit at Haven Chapel Methodist Church in the summer of 1962, the young Gadsden native had earned undergraduate and graduate degrees from Clark College and Boston University and had traveled extensively, including missionary work in Hawaii. His experiences had demonstrated the possibilities of "a different racial scenario," free from the restrictions of segregation, where people of disparate races could mingle openly and without fear of reprisal. "Surely, I knew, there had to be some persons in Anniston who had seen life differently, and who had the guts enough to stand up and say so!" he writes. "Surely there must be some people who knew that segregation and discrimination are evil." McClain, however, was unsure of how to locate and approach such kindred spirits. "[Who] were those white people in Anniston," he wondered. "How did you find them in such a segregated arrangement? And what would you do when you did find them?"¹¹

McClain's inquiries and reflections eventually led to his friendship with Nimrod Q. Reynolds, the pastor of Seventeenth Street Baptist Church, who would become his "closest associate in the struggle for civil rights." Reynolds, like both McClain and Noble, was new to the Model City. Born in Chambers County, Alabama, in 1931, he was the youngest of six children of Shelley and Bessie Reynolds. His father worked as a sharecropper in the small hamlet of Five Points until the "glorious day" when he acquired a 125-acre farm and began enjoying the modicum of freedom that came with land ownership. Ordained a minister in 1952, Nimrod Reynolds went on to earn divinity degrees

¹¹ William B. McClain, foreword to *Beyond the Burning Bus*, 9–16; Noble, *Beyond the Burning Bus*, 43, 46.

from Clark College and Gammon Theological Seminary in Atlanta. During his final year at Clark, he accepted a pastorate at tiny First Baptist Church in Union Springs, Alabama, making the 150-mile commute each weekend to preach Sunday service. In 1955, Reynolds became active in the Montgomery bus boycott, beginning his long affiliation with King and, eventually, the SCLC. Five years later, Reynolds was offered the pulpit at Seventeenth Street Baptist Church in Anniston. Drawing from his experiences in the bus boycott, he organized the Calhoun County Improvement Association (CCIA) in 1960 as “a power base to work toward civil rights” and as a logical replacement for the NAACP, which had been enjoined from operating in the state in 1956. The CCIA maintained a relatively low profile at first, but following the 1961 Freedom Ride bus attack membership grew and the local movement began to take shape. With the arrival of Reverend McClain in 1962, Reynolds had found someone who shared his deep commitment and desire for social justice. “It was clear to me when I first met [Reynolds] that we were kindred spirits,” McClain writes. The “more we talked about the plight of black people, the more we knew we were a team and had to do something. And we began to search for some brave white soul who would at least talk to us about ‘the problem,’ that problem W. E. B. Du Bois had identified as the major one for America for the twentieth century—the ‘color line.’”¹²

Initially, Reynolds and McClain had tremendous difficulty in locating that “brave white soul.” The white ministers of Anniston were unwilling to even meet with them, much less join hands to inaugurate a program for social justice. Eventually, Phil Noble agreed to see them, inviting them to his office at First Presbyterian. In a 1991 letter to Noble, Reverend McClain recalled their introductory meeting:

I remember how Nimrod and I laid the case of the racial situation in Anniston before you: the low-paying jobs, the treatment of black employees in jani-

¹²For a biographical sketch of N. Q. Reynolds, see Deric A. Gilliard, *Living in the Shadows of a Legend: Unsung Heroes and ‘Sheroes’ Who Marched with Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr.* (Decatur, Ga., 2002), 121–32, and *Anniston Star*, January 17, 1971.

torial and other positions of low esteem, the police brutality, the false arrests, the harassment of black people in general, the injustice to not register black people to vote, the segregation and its indefensiveness in the light of the constitution and Gospel, etc., and I remember you [saying], “Brothers, let’s have a word of prayer.” And you prayed like I never heard a Southern white man pray—and you cried as you prayed—and I had never seen a Southern white man cry about anything that related to black people and justice. Nimrod and I cried, too. And we moved from there. That is where the movement for change in Anniston came from.

Reynolds and McClain had found, in their words, the “one white Christian” in Anniston and left Noble’s office with renewed spirit. Shortly thereafter, Reynolds telephoned Noble again, requesting an additional meeting at Seventeenth Street Baptist Church. Joining them were two other clergymen, George Smitherman of Mt. Calvary Baptist Church, which boasted the largest African American congregation in town, and Alvin Bullen, the white minister of Grace Episcopal Church. “The result of our first meeting was nothing more than the recognition by us all that we needed desperately to build some bridges of communication,” Noble writes. “We needed it and our communities needed it, if we were ever to deal with our problem without violence.”¹³

More meetings followed. Additional participants were drawn from the white and black ministerial associations of Anniston. Consequently, the two organizations began conducting regular monthly meetings, rotating “the location of the meetings between the white and black churches.” Their discussions typically “dealt with common concerns of all the ministers,” but would invariably focus upon the issue of race. At some point in the autumn of 1962, the two groups

¹³Noble, *Beyond the Burning Bus*, 42–50; Gilliard, *Living in the Shadows of a Legend*, 121. McClain’s letter is quoted in Noble, *Beyond the Burning Bus*, 42–43.

voted to merge, adopting the name of the Anniston Ministerial Association (AMA). On October 23, 1962, the organization went public and joined with the newly inaugurated mayor, Claude Dear, to call for a “community-wide prayer event” on “behalf of our nation and world and their leaders.” Three weeks later, on November 13, the AMA took an even bolder step, beseeching local residents “to meet any school integration crises with Christian standards of responsibility and obedience to law and order.” The association’s declaration, which was printed in the *Anniston Star*, went on to express the AMA’s belief “that every human being is created in the image of God and is entitled to respect as a fellow human being with all basic rights, principles, and responsibilities.”¹⁴

Two things resulted from the AMA’s creation and subsequent public statements. First, members of the organization began receiving threatening letters and phone calls, which would continue unabated for many more months. The association even drew the attention and ire of state officials, according to Phil Noble. On one occasion, members of the organization emerged from a meeting at Trinity Lutheran Church to find a state highway patrol officer on the opposite side of the street, snapping photographs of them. “So far as I know,” Noble writes, “not a single minister tried to avoid having his picture taken and thus escape notice as someone to be watched by state law enforcement.” Second, and more positively, the AMA began forging close ties with local government officials. Several times in the fall and winter of 1962, Noble traveled to a south Georgia hunting lodge owned by H. Miller Sproull, Anniston’s newly elected finance commissioner and the scion of one of the city’s most prominent families, to hunt quail. Traipsing over the rugged terrain, shotguns in hand, the two men would often discuss the city’s racial climate. “We talked at length about the need for a city-appointed bi-racial committee,” Noble recalls. “He assured me that the city commission was indeed going to appoint such a committee. I knew he was committed to doing this, but given the situation, proper timing was important.”¹⁵

¹⁴ *Anniston Star*, November 13, 1962; Noble, *Beyond the Burning Bus*, 51 and 71–73.

¹⁵ Noble, *Beyond the Burning Bus*, 51–52 and 73–74.

The idea of a biracial committee was not unique to Anniston. All across the South, such groups—which were local variations of larger regional and national organizations like the Commission on Interracial Cooperation and the Southern Regional Council—were touted as solutions to racial conflict. In Tampa, Memphis, Dallas, and even Birmingham, biracial committees had been appointed before and during the civil rights movement to ameliorate racial problems and open lines of communication between the white and black communities. By “organizing themselves into biracial committees and pressure groups,” writes Elizabeth Jacoway, “the businessmen then began to cast about for issues with which to oppose extremist elements and/or officials; they generally seized on issues that sidestepped the central question of integration versus segregation, arguing instead for such things as open schools, community stability, and social order.” Jacoway could have been writing about Anniston. In the minds of the white elite, the biracial committee could prove a panacea for the city’s racial difficulties and help stave off future demonstrations and/or violence.¹⁶

The opportunity to create the committee soon presented itself with the May 1963 shotgun attacks by Kenneth Adams and William Boyd. “The stream of Anniston’s history took a turn for good as a result of the actions of a few evil and cowardly men,” Noble writes. The day after the shooting incidents, Noble and his fellow clergymen took action. They sent two letters—one from the wards and vestry of Grace Episcopal Church, another from the Anniston Ministerial Association—to the city commissioners, urging the immediate formation of a biracial committee. Of the three commissioners, Sproull was the only one completely sold on the idea, having adopted it as part of his election platform back in the spring primary elections of 1962. (The idea for the committee had first been raised by Gordon Rodgers Jr., a local black dentist, who ran unsuccessfully for the office of public safety commissioner in the same municipal election.) Public Safety

¹⁶For numerous examples of biracial committees, see Elizabeth Jacoway and David R. Colburn, eds., *Southern Businessmen and Desegregation* (Baton Rouge, 1982), 8, 12, 59, 77–78, 140, 143–47, 149–50, 174–79, 182, 186, 188–90, 199, 219, 222, 227–28, 230, 239–40, 250, 252, 262, 265–72, 277, 280, 285–86, and 295.

Commissioner Jack Suggs, however, seemed “less enthusiastic” about the idea—perhaps afraid of how the rest of the white community would react. Mayor Claude Dear, therefore, emerged as the crucial swing vote. According to some published reports, he was “probably favorably inclined” toward establishing the committee, and had even alluded to it during the previous year’s mayoral campaign, but he was hesitant to act now because of certain “political implications.” According to Noble, both Dear and Sproull were concerned about the lack of support from Commissioner Suggs. Without his approval, the police department might be reluctant to uphold “the probable recommendations of a biracial committee,” resulting in “chaotic conditions for the community.” So for three days after the Mother’s Day shootings, the issue hung in the air as the commissioners weighed their options and consulted with local business and industrial leaders.¹⁷

On the morning of May 16, the city commission convened a special session. Anticipating that some action would be forthcoming on the proposed biracial committee, Kenneth Adams and several members of his entourage packed the commission room, commandeering every available seat. They maintained their silence and kept their stares fixed upon the three commissioners throughout the meeting, never once voicing objections to the proceedings. After dispensing with formalities, Mayor Dear and his colleagues voted on two resolutions—one to create a biracial committee, styled the “Human Relations Council,” and another to appoint its nine members. Sproull and Dear voted in the affirmative on both motions, while a “grim-faced Jack Suggs” voted against them. Next, the commissioners announced the nine individuals who would ultimately compose the council. Perhaps in an effort to waylay future criticism of the group, Dear and the

¹⁷ *Anniston Star*, May 14 and 16, 1963, and December 26, 1999; Noble, *Beyond the Burning Bus*, 75–78; Claude Dear, interview by author, August 22, 2001, Anniston, in author’s possession (hereafter referred to as “Dear interview”). According to Reverend Noble, Commissioner Sproull telephoned the night of the Mother’s Day shootings and informed him the commission was prepared to appoint the biracial committee. Sproull wanted Noble to be chairman of the group. The commissioners also sent word to McClain and Reynolds, insuring them the committee would be appointed in a few days. The action did much to calm an angry and vengeful black community following the shootings.

others omitted all references to race from the two resolutions and ensured the committee had a white majority. They also made certain that members of the Council were some of the leading citizens from their respective communities. The five white appointees included Reverend Noble; Wilfred Galbraith, executive editor of the *Anniston Star*; Marcus Howze, president of the Commercial National Bank; Leonard Roberts, president of the Classic Ribbon Company and vice president of Adelaide Mills and Tape-Craft Inc.; and Fred Vann, a business agent for Painters Local 151. The black members included Reynolds and McClain; Raleigh Byrd, the owner and operator of a dry cleaning business; and Grant Oden, a civilian employee at Fort McClellan. Following the announcement of council appointments, Dear brought the meeting to a close. Adams and his companions quickly filed out of the room. A few minutes later, Dear got in his car and drove to Adams's gas station along Highway 202, where the owner and several of his cronies had gathered after the meeting. The mayor entered the establishment, walked over to the beverage cooler, took out a bottle of Coca-Cola, paid for it, and, while Adams and the others stared at him in disbelief, casually drank it down. Afterwards, Dear got back in his car and drove home. His action, the mayor said later, was to demonstrate to the Klansmen that he was not afraid of them. "Of course," writes Noble, "Claude also said he very carefully kept the Coke bottle in his hand until he got back into his car in case he needed to use it."¹⁸

Reaction to the formation of the Human Relations Council varied. A majority of the business and industrial leaders in the city applauded the action, believing it would do much to restore Anniston's good name and ensure a peaceful future. The *Anniston Star* concluded: "It is true that in some quarters the formation of a bi-racial group . . . is regarded as surrender to the race-mixers. But this is not the case. . . . The aim of Anniston's City Commissioners is to retain the policing of this community in local hands, as the alternative to possible martial law." Praise poured in from outside the region as well. In a letter

¹⁸ *Anniston Star*, May 16, 1963, December 26, 1999, and March 5, 2000; Dear interview; Anniston City Commission, Minutes, "Resolutions 3153 and 3156," May 16, 1963; Noble, *Beyond the Burning Bus*, 84-89.

to the city commissioners, President Kennedy said the Human Relations Council should “serve as a model” for other American cities. “It seems to me this is a most significant action by the city government and one that offers great hope for permitting legitimate racial problems to be identified and considered in a calm and orderly manner,” he wrote. “I hope that the council will provide the city of Anniston with a means of communication between the races and that its efforts will be fruitful.” Another “key administration official” said that “some southern cities have shown that they can handle the problem better than in the north,” and held up Anniston, Atlanta, Memphis, and Nashville as prime examples.¹⁹

Back home, particularly in the white working class neighborhoods of west Anniston, the new biracial committee was met with disgust and disapproval. “I deplore the recent action by the Anniston City Commission,” wrote one resident. “White and Negro law breakers will be caught and punished for unlawful acts and harmony will prevail among the white and colored people of Anniston. We do not need any kind of board, or outside agitators or local headline hunters, to tell us how to get along with each other.” The largely middle class vestry of the First Baptist Church of Anniston, located along West Fifteenth Street, passed a resolution on May 22 condemning “members of the Negro and white races working jointly or separately for the purpose of mixing the races.” They resolved that if any demonstrators or protesters happened upon the door of their church in an effort to integrate the congregation it would “constitute a disturbance of public worship” and the offending parties would be escorted out with “courtesy and respect.” If this failed to dislodge them, the police would be summoned.²⁰

Others were not as gracious. After voting to create the biracial committee, Mayor Dear and his fellow commissioners began receiving

¹⁹ *Anniston Star*, May 21, 27, and June 7, 1963; *New York Herald Tribune*, May 23, 1963; Dear interview. For years, Claude Dear said the original letter from Kennedy to the city commissioners had been maintained in a scrapbook at his east Anniston home but at some point went missing.

²⁰ *Anniston Star*, May 17, 20, 21, and 23, 1963; Anniston First Baptist Church, Records, 1941–1975, “Resolution presented to First Baptist Church after Special Church Conference, May 22, 1963,” Alabama Room, Liles Memorial Library, Anniston, Alabama.

regular death threats over the telephone. “You’re turning everything over to the niggers!” the callers would scream. Governor George Wallace, too, voiced his objections, calling up Dear one day to ask, “What’s the score on that damn nigger board you appointed?” Aware that Anniston was scheduled to receive state funds for street repairs, Wallace “made a veiled threat” to cut off such financial assistance. But Dear called his bluff: “Are you going to come trying to interfere with the city of Anniston running its affairs? I am the elected Mayor and I will run the city the way I think best.” Afterwards, Dear telephoned State Senator A. C. Shelton of Calhoun County and recounted the conversation with Wallace. The mayor also threatened to take the story to a United Press International reporter who happened to be in town at the time. Realizing how this would play out in the press—a powerful southern governor imposing his authority upon the mayor of a small, nondescript city—Wallace backed down. He had bigger fish to fry. Within an hour of the original conversation between Dear and Wallace, someone from the governor’s staff called the mayor “to find out what funds he needed for the city’s streets and roads, and promised they would be forthcoming.”²¹

The first few months of the Human Relations Council itself were marked by continued intimidation and dissension. On May 18, just two days after its formation, member Fred Vann resigned. In a written statement to the *Anniston Star*, he attempted to explain his sudden departure: “I don’t see how anyone thinks a committee can establish peace with the races when the newspapers are [sowing] hatred by attacking the governor of Alabama. . . . I hereby state I support Gov. George C. Wallace . . . 100 per cent. I cannot serve on a committee to establish racial peace when the press is stirring up hatred by slandering the governor.” Days later, the city commission appointed Harold Cosper, the proprietor of Central Color Photo, to fill the vacancy. Vann never publicly elaborated on why he chose to suddenly distance himself from the council, but others suspected he had been threatened in some way. A day after the names of the committee members were published in the *Anniston Star*, an irate Vann contacted

²¹ Dear interview; Noble, *Beyond the Burning Bus*, 95–96.

Phil Noble and said he could no longer associate with a group whose sole purpose was to “sell out to the niggers.” “Apparently someone had gotten to him,” Noble recalls, “and caused him to be afraid to serve.”²²

Vann’s fears were certainly warranted. Committee members received threatening and intimidating phone calls on a daily basis. “Let me speak to that black ape,” one caller said to Phil Noble’s wife, Betty. When she suggested to the “gravelly voice” on the other end of the phone that he had dialed the wrong number, the caller snarled, “Naw, I don’t have the wrong number. Let me speak to that black ape.” The high frequency of such calls quickly convinced the committee that it needed to be discreet when conducting business. Meetings were held at secret locales, usually in the boardrooms of local utility companies, the YMCA, or the Chamber of Commerce building, and they had to be arranged on very short notice. “You staggered the time, you staggered the location, you staggered everything,” Dear said. The Klan was “watching everything and everybody, but you can’t keep up with nine people at the same time. We had meetings almost in secret. Nobody knew more than 30 minutes before the meeting where it would be held. If it was a Friday, they’d get a call on Thursday afternoon saying there would be a meeting on Friday. Friday morning, another call would tell them the time and place.”²³

Despite the tense atmosphere, the council managed to establish viable lines of communication between the city and its black residents. In the past, certain biracial collaborations had been forged in Anniston to cool tempers in times of crisis and demonstrate to the white power structure that leaders from the black community could still toe the party line. But now, with the formation of the Human Relations Council, a genuine exchange of ideas seemed possible. Its African American members—Reynolds, McClain, Byrd, and Oden—were determined to use it as an instrument of social change, confronting problems rather than skirting them. During the initial meetings of

²² *Anniston Star*, May 18 and 20, 1963; Noble, *Beyond the Burning Bus*, 87; Anniston City Commission, Minutes, “Resolution 3156,” May 28, 1963. Vann’s statement can be found in the *Anniston Star*, May 18, 1963.

²³ *Anniston Star*, December 26, 1999, and March 5, 2000; Dear interview.

the group, they provided white members with a long list of concerns and grievances. "The list ran the gamut from patterns of segregation that affected their everyday lives to discrimination in jobs," writes Phil Noble. In the broadest terms possible, Reynolds and his brethren tried to elucidate for the white members what it was like to be a black person in Anniston, describing the dim job prospects, substandard housing, incidents of police brutality, poverty, social discrimination, everything. "Segregation was strict and severe," writes Noble, "and every day blacks faced its dehumanizing effects."²⁴

The white members of the council were sympathetic, but slow to respond. Despite their willingness to join the Human Relations Council, they (excluding Noble) were circumspect about its implications, afraid to concede too much. "I have no intention of being a part of dismantling the pattern of segregation which has been a part of our southern way of life for many years," Leonard Roberts admitted. Indeed, throughout the council's existence, white members were steered by caution and an unwillingness to relinquish too much control. "'How little can we give and still keep demonstrations and boycotts from happening,' might best summarize the attitude of the white members of the council," writes Noble. By maintaining a "sensitive and delicate balance between what the black community wanted and what the white community was willing to give," the elite could keep Anniston out of the limelight, avoid violence, and, most importantly, retain power over the city's social and civic institutions.²⁵

Expectedly, the council's initial actions were modest. According to Noble, they "began with what was considered the simplest and easiest things to do." They met with the managers of local retail outlets, such as Roses, Silvers, and Kress, respectively, and asked them to remove Jim Crow signs from water fountains and bathrooms. Although hesitant at first, the managers ultimately complied with the request, removing the humiliating signs without incident. Afterwards, the council began weighing in on more complicated matters. Shortly after the group's creation, administrators at Anniston Memorial Hospital discharged an African American man with syphilis, claiming they did

²⁴Noble, *Beyond the Burning Bus*, 102–3.

²⁵*Ibid.*, 103–4.

not possess the proper treatment facilities. The disease, which had ravaged his body for an extended period of time, had now robbed him of his mental faculties. He was, according to the hospital, completely uncontrollable. When the matter was brought to the council, members convened an emergency meeting. Enlisting the help of Mayor Dear, they arranged for the patient to be transported to city hall and then quartered in a special “padded cell.” In the past, he would have simply been discharged and left to his own devices. But now there was a mechanism in place to deal with such predicaments, even if the solutions were at times less than ideal.²⁶

Flushed with these kinds of successes, the Human Relations Council was prepared to tackle bigger projects by late summer. On August 19, a Reverend Jackson (who was African American) entered the Carnegie Library and requested a copy of the *Interpreter's Bible*. The librarian, Ann Everett, informed the clergyman that because the book in question was a reference work it could not be taken out of the building, and, further, since the library was still segregated, he could not use the reading room to examine it. “In other words, I cannot sit down in here and use” the reference books, he asked. Everett said he could not, but she did offer the use of her own office. Jackson declined and walked out. A few minutes later, Dr. Gordon Rodgers Jr., a local black dentist and activist, telephoned the library, wondering why Jackson had been refused service. Everett referred him to attorney Charles Doster, the chairman of the library board.²⁷

Back in 1961, following the Freedom Ride bus attack, Doster went to *Anniston Star* publisher Harry Mell Ayers, who was chairman of the library board at the time, and suggested the city integrate the Carnegie Library, which was located on the corner of Tenth Street and Wilmer Avenue. The old library, built in 1918 with contributory

²⁶Ibid., 104; Dear interview.

²⁷Harry Mell Ayers to Claude Dear, January 9, 1963, Ayers Papers, Stanley Hoole Special Collections Library, University of Alabama, Tuscaloosa; Ann Everett to Charles Doster, August 19, 1963, and Charles Doster to Claude Dear, August 22, 1963, Board of Trustees of the Anniston Public Library, Minutes, Liles Memorial Library. The story of the desegregation of Anniston's public library is vividly recounted in Patterson Toby Graham, *A Right to Read: Segregation and Civil Rights in Alabama's Public Libraries, 1900–1965* (Tuscaloosa, 2002), 91–98.

funds from the Andrew Carnegie Foundation, seemed like the perfect place to commence the process of desegregation. It was quiet and tucked away—a place that did not seem as racially contentious or as politically charged as a schoolhouse or public swimming pool. But Ayers, who had been chairman of the Anniston Library Board since most people could remember, declined to even consider the proposition. He continued to insist, as he had throughout the decades, that the best course of action would be to provide equitable facilities for the black community, which, in the end, would serve to neutralize the primary impulse behind the recent push for civil rights. “I notice that in several cities the dividing line already has been wiped out, and we want to continue segregation here,” Ayers had written back in 1957, “[but] I do not believe we can do so unless we give the Negroes better library facilities.” By 1961, his views had changed little. Even after the city had experienced its most shameful moment in the Freedom Ride attack, Ayers still insisted the relationship between the black and white people of Anniston remained fundamentally intact. But Doster knew better. He could sense the anger and resentment building in the African American community. Ever since the *Brown v. Board of Education* decision, blacks in the city had maintained a relatively low profile and had not involved themselves too directly with the regional struggle for civil rights. But by the early 1960s, their capacity for patience and understanding was nearing an end. If Anniston desired to preserve what was left of its reputation and avoid another incident like the 1961 Freedom Ride bus attack, immediate concessions would have to be made. Only then, Doster believed, could the city retain control of its institutions and desegregate at its own pace.²⁸

Three days after Reverend Jackson’s visit to the library, at a regular meeting of the board, Doster renewed and restated the idea of integrating the Carnegie Library, telling his fellow members that he had been contacted in recent days by Rodgers and representatives of the Human Relations Council. Both parties, he said, had expressed a

²⁸ *Anniston Star*, May 28, 1961, and December 26, 1999; Harry Mell Ayers to George Morris, January 8, 1957, Ayers Papers.

The Carnegie
Library in Anniston,
Alabama. Image
courtesy of Alabama
Department of
Archives and History,
Montgomery,
Alabama.

desire to see the color barrier breached at the library. The rest of the board agreed that desegregation was the way to go, but they wanted the full backing of the city commission before moving ahead. Before adjourning the meeting, the trustees drafted a resolution that would effectively end segregation at the Carnegie Library, and then sent it along to Mayor Dear for his and the other commissioners' approval. The library board reconvened on September 12. Days before, Sproull had sent a letter to Chairman Doster, informing him that a majority of the city commission was in favor of desegregating the Carnegie Library (Commissioner Suggs was steadfastly opposed to the idea, but vowed "nevertheless [to] maintain law and order"). So with the city government's seal of approval in hand, Doster and the other trustees got down to a discussion of logistics. They decided that Sunday, September 15, would be the best day to proceed with their plans, since the downtown area would be all but deserted. They decided, too, that police should definitely not be involved, at least not directly. Doster felt that a large police contingent posted outside the library would draw attention to what was going on inside and perhaps lure troublemakers to the scene. He wanted Anniston's initial stab at desegregation to be as painless and as peaceful as possible. To that end, he believed that a lone officer, armed with a radio and stationed in the basement, would not only provide sufficient protection, but would keep their intentions sufficiently hidden from public view.²⁹

Doster could not have been more wrong. On the afternoon of September 15, 1963—just a few hours after a dynamite blast tore a hole in the Sixteenth Street Baptist Church in Birmingham, killing four young children—Anniston began the slow process of desegregation. Reverends Reynolds and McClain arrived at the Carnegie Library around two o'clock in the afternoon. They parked their automobile a block from the library, along East Tenth Street, and walked the rest of the way. A crowd of white men, numbering between fifty and a hundred individuals and armed with sticks, bats, chains, and broken beer bottles, were waiting for the ministers when they arrived. Some of the

²⁹Board of Trustees of the Anniston Public Library, Minutes, September 12, 1963; Charles Doster, interview by author, Anniston, August 22, 2001 (hereafter referred to as "Doster interview"); *Anniston Star*, September 16 and 17, 1963, and December 26, 1999.

men had used masking tape to cover their facial features, making the process of identifying them later all the more difficult. When Reynolds and McClain, seemingly undeterred by the white mob, set foot upon the library's front sidewalk, the men pounced. One of them grabbed McClain, spun him around, and asked, "Where are you going?" Before the minister could respond, he was struck with "fists and sticks by several persons." Junk dealer William Boyd, who had joined Kenneth Adams in his Mother's Day shooting spree, went after Reynolds with a long chain, slashing him across the face. Someone else pushed through the crowd and stabbed the young preacher twice in the buttocks with a knife. Reynolds collapsed to the ground. McClain ran over to assist his companion, fighting through a gauntlet of sticks and arms. Somehow, Reynolds managed to regain his feet and the two ministers beat a hasty retreat back to the car with the mob in close pursuit. Once inside the automobile, the two men realized they could not pull out of the parking space because they were "jammed in by another vehicle." But before they could bail out, the mob surrounded the car and began shaking it from side to side. Seconds later, a single gunshot tore through the passenger's side window. "If we'd stayed there, we'd have obviously been killed," McClain said afterwards. The two clergymen forced their way out of the car and ran as fast as they could toward Quintard Avenue. A few minutes later, an African American motorist picked them up and whisked them to the emergency room at Anniston Memorial Hospital, where they were treated and released.³⁰

That evening, city officials struggled to keep a lid on a situation that seemed destined to erupt into rioting and more gunplay. "I intend to do everything in my power to maintain law and order," vowed Commissioner Suggs. Investigators fanned out over the community in an effort to track down the perpetrators, while police patrols were beefed up in potential problem areas. Mayor Dear posted a thousand-dollar reward for information leading to the arrest and conviction

³⁰ *Anniston Star*, September 16 and 21, 1963; *Atlanta Constitution*, September 16, 1963; *Montgomery Advertiser*, September 16, 1963; *Birmingham Post-Herald*, September 16, 1963; Doster interview; Noble, *Beyond the Burning Bus*, 111–12; Gilliard, *Living in the Shadows of a Legend*, 122–23.

of those responsible for the attack, telling reporters there would be “no wasted time” until the guilty parties were behind bars. Charles Doster assured the public that the Carnegie Library would most definitely be open to patrons the following morning, despite the assault upon the ministers. “We’re not going to let a bunch of hoodlums run the library,” he said. But despite such measures, the violence in front of the library begat even more violence. Just after dark, a white man, Frank Brown, was jumped and severely beaten by a group of African American teenagers as he strolled through a predominantly black neighborhood in west Anniston. “We decided to kill the first white man we saw on 15th Street,” one of the assailants reportedly told police. Later that night, someone fired three gunshots into a black-owned café and then sped off into the darkness. Anniston seemed on the verge of a race war.³¹

In an effort to calm fears, demonstrate solidarity, and soothe tempers in the black community, Noble, Dear, Sproull, and Doster drove (with a police escort) over to the parsonage of Seventeenth Street Baptist Church, where Reverend Reynolds lay in bed, recovering from his wounds. “When we arrived, the house was surrounded by a group of armed black men,” Noble recalls. “They parted to let us through.” Once inside, the four men offered their condolences and assured Reynolds, along with the small group of African American ministers who had gathered around his bedside, that the city was doing everything within its power to safeguard residents and hunt down the offending parties. “Like all the citizens of Anniston, the City Commission is very sorry,” Dear told him. Doster pledged that the “goons” were not going to stop them—that they were going to integrate the library no matter what. “We are not backing down,” he said. “We’re not going to let them run either our town or [the] library. Period. Forget it.” Yet, some of the ministers were unimpressed by the rhetoric. “The Negroes of Anniston have been patient,” said G. E. Smitherman, the pastor of Mt. Calvary Baptist Church. “We waited while all around us, there have been marches, sit-ins, kneel-ins, and what not. We’d hoped the bi-racial committee wouldn’t be [a

³¹ *Anniston Star*, September 16, 19, and 20, 1963.

mere] appeasement. Evidently that is not the answer.” Referring to the sporadic acts of violence that were cropping up throughout the city, Smitherman admitted that “we ministers don’t have all the Negroes in our hand,” but vowed to continue working for non-violent solutions to their ongoing problems. In turn, he urged Dear to “caution police to exercise good judgment as regards [to] brutality and that sort of thing” when apprehending black residents. “One match can make a flame,” he warned.³²

Smitherman’s doubts and concerns seemed justified. For decades, acts of police brutality had gone unpunished in Anniston, while violent racists were free to roam and pillage. Even now, with the city taking its initial steps toward integration, white leaders appeared to encourage the actions of the mob by not posting police officers outside the library on the afternoon of September 15. The library board had convinced Reynolds and McClain beforehand they would be safe, but such assurances quickly evaporated in the face of the attack. “We had hoped there would be police protection,” an angry Reynolds said afterwards, “[but] we didn’t see a policeman until we’d run halfway to the police station.” Years later, Doster would admit that not having officers on the scene was a colossal mistake. At the time, however, the library board and city commissioners were looking to integrate the library with little or no fanfare—to simply do it, get it over with, and move on. A large group of policemen, they surmised, would draw attention to the process and attract a bevy of undesirables. In fact, only a few people in the entire community (perhaps twenty or less)

³² *Anniston Star*, September 16, 1963, and December 26, 1999; Doster interview; Dear interview. While Dear and the others conversed with the black ministers at the Seventeenth Street Baptist Church, word came over the police band radio that President Kennedy had telephoned the home of a prominent Anniston dentist and was presently holding the line, waiting to speak with the mayor and other city leaders. After a quick prayer by one of the preachers (“I thought that son of a bitch would never quit praying,” Doster quipped), the men raced back to east Anniston to take the president’s call. Kennedy offered his condolences and told Dear that “his brother Bobby” would be getting in touch with him the following day. Sure enough, representatives from the Justice Department turned up at city hall the next morning with an offer of federal assistance. Dear, who had “arrived to work early, unshaven and wholly surprised by his visitors,” thanked the men for their concern and support, but told them he thought local authorities could best handle the situation. See Dear and Doster interviews and *Anniston Star*, December 26, 1999.

were even supposed to know about the plan beforehand. As Reynolds explained later:

We were stupid, and I guess maybe it was God's plan. . . . We had sat down with the council and decided we were going to do it quietly. The Library board was going to make sure everything was secure and safe and we just didn't make no announcement. . . . We were stupid that we didn't tell any of our own people, but we probably would have had a blood bath. That's the only thing that saved us.

The intention was to integrate the facility, then release a brief explanatory press statement. But somewhere along the way word leaked out and Klansmen were waiting for the two ministers when they arrived. Doster suspected that Adams and his associates had received information about the library directly from the police station, which purportedly housed a number of Klan members. Phil Noble concurred: "I feel strongly that the police knew full well not only of the plans for the Library desegregation but also of the Klan's plan for a violent response. It was telling that the police did not arrive on the scene until the violence was over. . . . Ample evidence has been revealed of Southern police officers who were also KKK members and there is no doubt in my mind that we had some of this in Anniston." Others theorized that the attackers had been listening to a police scanner on Sunday afternoon and had picked up transmissions from the lone officer stationed in the library's basement. Either way, the operation had been compromised from the outset, and Reynolds and McClain were left to fend for themselves.³³

³³ *Anniston Star*, September 16 and 17, 1963, and December 26, 1999; Doster interview; Noble, *Beyond the Burning Bus*, 116; Gilliard, *Living in the Shadows of a Legend*, 123. The Anniston police Department had always had a contentious relationship with the city's African American populace. In 1960, an investigation by the Alabama Department of Public Safety (ADPS) turned up numerous examples of fraud, blackmail, and brutality perpetrated by Anniston police officers upon the black community. In 1959, for example, two city detectives, William E. Deason and Homer Rascoe, allegedly gunned down a local black man without having "just cause to do so" and were exonerated after a brief internal investiga-

Doster supposed that picking a Sunday to begin Anniston's integration process was another bad decision on the part of the library board and city commission. "One doesn't integrate on Sunday," he said. "There are too many hoodlums on Sunday that [are off work] and have nothing to do." Reverend Noble agreed. "Choosing that particular day was probably not a wise decision, in retrospect," he said. But the board members deemed Sunday the clear choice, since presumably everyone would be at home with their families and the downtown area would be all but deserted. Of course, it did not work out that way, and the Klansmen turned out in droves. Doster said the joke amongst the board members and commissioners afterwards was: "Who told them where the library was [anyway]?"³⁴

Clearly, they had made some mistakes, but Doster and the others were determined to complete their task to demonstrate to the African American community that the city and the white establishment could be trusted. The morning after the attack, September 16, the library board held an emergency session to discuss the previous day's violence and pick a suitable time for another desegregation attempt. After contacting the city commission and members of the Human

tion. In 1960, the same two detectives were discharged by the city commission after using their positions "to force local Negroes to do business with the Build-Rite Remodeling Company," which was partially owned by one of the officers. According to the ADPS investigative report, Rascoe and Deason had arrested an African American woman named Hattie Young in March 1960 for violating the city's prohibition laws. When they informed her husband, James Young, of the cost of Hattie's fines, he told the detectives he could not afford to pay them. Rascoe pulled the distressed man aside and told him they could "work something up." If James would agree to sign a contract with the Build-Rite Company for remodeling work on his house, the officers would see their way clear to "lend" Young the money for his wife's fines. They would simply include the price of the fines with the costs of the remodeling and help James secure a bank loan to pay for it all. James agreed. When Hattie gained her release and learned of the contract, she refused to honor it. The following day, James went to a loan company and borrowed enough cash to pay the fine and the penalty costs for forfeiture of contract. He eventually took the matter to Chief of Detectives Clarence Pate, who, in turn, went to the city commissioners. A close examination of the books revealed no arrest record for Hattie Young. See the *Anniston Star*, June 28, 1960, and Anniston City Commission, Minutes, June 28, 1960. For other examples of police misconduct and unpunished acts of racial violence in Anniston, see Sprayberry, "'Town Among the Trees,'" 210-71.

³⁴ *Anniston Star*, December 26, 1999; Dear interview; Doster interview.

Relations Council, the board elected to proceed with integration that very afternoon. "It was absolutely essential that we go on with plans to desegregate the library," writes Noble. "We had to make crystal clear to the citizens of Anniston, and especially to the hoodlums, that the city was not going to be run by mobs!" At precisely half past three, Commissioner Sproull, Reverend Noble, Doster, and another member of the library board, Carlton Lentz, met up with McClain and Smitherman in a parking lot near the Carnegie Library. Following an uneasy exchange of pleasantries, the group made its way over to the library, where a small army of police officers and a few curious on-lookers waited. Once inside, McClain and Smitherman approached the front counter, where they were issued library cards. A member of the staff then gave the two ministers an abbreviated tour of the facilities. A handful of potential "troublemakers glowered" at McClain and Smitherman as they scanned the shelves for books and conversed with the librarian, but due to the heavy police protection there were no incidents. After the two men checked out a few books, they were escorted out a side door to "avoid any possible incident at the front of the library." Anniston's color barrier had been broken.³⁵

In the hours and days following the library's integration, the local rumor mill went into full production. According to one story making the rounds, an African American family was preparing to move into federal housing units in the nearby hamlet of Bynum, which was adjacent to the Anniston Army Depot. Once there, the younger members of the family would make an integration attempt at one of the schools in the vicinity. In a rare front-page editorial, the publisher of the *Anniston Star* assured the public that no such plans were in the works, and that representatives from both the white and black communities had summarily rebuked these claims. The editorial read:

There's no denying that social change is under way.
But nothing cataclysmic is going to take place local
this week, this month, this year, or during this cen-

³⁵ *Anniston Star*, September 17, 1963; Board of Trustees of the Anniston Public Library, Minutes, September 16, 1963; Noble, *Beyond the Burning Bus*, 116–17.

ture, for that matter. Whatever an individual's views happen to be in regard to race matters, he will not be confronted with intolerable conditions. Everything will not be as it was in the past, but there will be no changes to which a reasonable and fair-minded person cannot adjust.³⁶

The editorial, however, did little to stem the growing sense of fear and anger in the white community. Many residents saw the integration of the Carnegie Library as merely the first step in a long process that would eventually encompass their schools, churches, businesses, and neighborhoods. They were determined—perhaps now more than ever before—to prevent further incursions into the “white world.” Members of the library board, particularly Charles Doster, began receiving a daily barrage of death threats and insults over the phone. Anonymous callers warned Doster to look under the hood of his car for explosives, informing him that his day-to-day activities were being carefully observed and recorded. Klansmen visited the library two or three times a day to intimidate black patrons or hover around reading areas. On one occasion, a white “juvenile delinquent” visited the library and vandalized the adult section, scrawling the words “FIGHT INTEGRATION” across the bookshelves and walls. He even tore the spines from several volumes and wrote obscenities across the covers and pages of others. The situation deteriorated to such a point that many black residents were afraid to come in. By October 10, only forty-five library cards had been issued to African Americans. The ones who did visit the facility were not only subjected to varying levels of intimidation from purported Klan members; they became the objects of scorn and criticism from many of the regular white patrons as well, who claimed that black visitors were “not necessarily motivated by a desire to read” but had come to the library for the sole purpose of causing trouble.³⁷

³⁶ *Anniston Star*, September 18, 1963.

³⁷ Doster interview; Board of Trustees of the Anniston Public Library, Minutes, October 10 and November 7, 1963.

In the face of such resistance, Doster went on the offensive. He embarked on a speaking tour of the city, taking his message to local Rotary and Kiwanis clubs, to meetings at the Anniston Chamber of Commerce, and to several area churches. At each stop, Doster implored his audience to remain patient, work toward a peaceful resolution of the racial crisis, and, most importantly, help maintain “law and order” in the community. Not once did he ask the people to “support” desegregation efforts or show sympathy toward the civil rights movement. Doster, in fact, would admit years later that he had been “no fan of President Kennedy’s policies on civil rights.” But he realized that integration was essential to protect the town’s investments, restore its image, and keep the federal government on the sidelines. If they continued to resist, or if they continued to allow Adams and his associates to employ violence as a political tool, they could expect little but headaches and declining profits in coming years. Therefore, he urged residents to support the Human Relations Council’s ongoing efforts to resolve the crisis and restore the peace.³⁸

Following his speaking tour of the city, Doster confronted the mounting problems over at the Carnegie Library. To stop the daily harassment of black patrons, he decided to camp out in the library’s main reading area and keep a close eye on all suspicious activity. (Doster stayed at the library so much, in fact, that he had to curtail his duties at the law firm of Knox, Jones, Woolf, and Merrill.) He also had the library board pass a rule declaring that no one could enter the facility unless they had a valid library card or were about to be issued one. To demonstrate to the Klan and other potential troublemakers that he meant business, Doster approached a security guard one afternoon, pointed to an elderly man over in the adult reading section, and asked the guard to throw him out because he had never been issued a card. Doster instructed the guard to make plenty of noise while removing the man, so that everyone in the building would know what was transpiring and why. As it turned out, the expelled man was no Klan member—he was the former commanding general of Fort McClellan. Doster, of course, knew this, but he was

³⁸Doster interview.

determined to make an example out of the man in order to dissuade the real troublemakers. The tactic apparently worked, for the harassment of African American patrons ceased and black membership at the library rose. When the former commanding general found out that his friend Doster was behind his expulsion, he could only smile. He told Doster, "I've been thrown out of brothels and whorehouses and taverns and everything in this world, but it's the first time I've ever been thrown out of a . . . library."³⁹

The desegregation of the Carnegie Library, along with the formation of the Human Relations Council, spelled the end of an era in the city of Anniston. For nearly eighty years, business and industrial leaders had lent tacit support to the likes of Kenneth Adams and William "Red" Boyd, allowing them to do with guns and knives what they themselves could not do with legal and economic restrictions. But with the threat of federal intervention looming on the horizon, and with the town's financial future at stake, members of the elite decided it was time to steer a new course. Admittedly, their pace was slow. Two full years had passed since the Freedom Ride attack and the town had not submitted to the demands of civil rights activists. It took yet another round of violence—Adams's shooting spree on Mother's Day 1963, to be exact—before the city government and the business community consented to a biracial committee and, later, to the desegregation of the public library.

Ever since Anniston's founding, members of the elite had adhered to the philosophy of white supremacy while cloaking themselves in such lofty ideals as paternalism, racial uplift, and economic progress. In the words of one historian, they "allowed themselves to believe that they could maintain the traditional pattern of the South's race relations at the same time that they pursued industrialization and progress." But once the civil rights movement began to gather steam in the late 1950s and early 1960s, they had to choose between their traditional notions of race and the financial reality of the future. Most, of course, opted for the latter. But in doing so they refused to relinquish even one ounce of their control over the city's financial,

³⁹Ibid.

governmental, and social institutions. Integration was achieved, but on their terms. The biracial committee was formed, but it operated with a white majority. In truth, the elite did just enough to avoid federal intervention and prevent large-scale demonstrations. Over the next few years, the African American community, outside of a few criticism and barbs, contented itself with marginal integration and the promises of economic advancement, while the last vestiges of extremism were rooted out. But when the pace of progress began to stall in the late 1960s and early 1970s, blacks in Anniston took to the streets, seeking to reclaim a movement that the white elite had seemingly hijacked following the Freedom Ride attack. Hence, the revolution in spirit became a revolution in fact, and the white leadership class finally, and reluctantly, began to share some of its power.⁴⁰

⁴⁰Elizabeth Jacoway, "Civil Rights and the Changing South," in *Southern Businessmen and Desegregation*, eds., Elizabeth Jacoway and David Colburn (Baton Rouge, 1982), 6.

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