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The Bogalusa Movement: Self-Defense and Black Power in the Civil Rights Struggle

by Rickey Hill

THE FIRST recorded attempt by black people in Bogalusa, Louisiana to register to vote occurred in 1950. However, an organized civil rights movement did not begin there until 1965, when the all-black Bogalusa Civic and Voters League (the League) sought to test Bogalusa's compliance with the Civil Rights Act of 1964. From the beginning, the efforts to organize protests and demonstrations against racial segregation and public exclusion were met with white violence. The first national civil rights organization to come to the assistance of the League was the Congress of Racial Equality (CORE). As protests and demonstrations expanded to include the fight to secure voting rights following the passage of the Voting Rights Act of 1965, the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee (SNCC) joined the League and CORE to organize and support a broad based civil rights movement. However, the Bogalusa movement was an authentically organic movement, organized and led by local people.

The Bogalusa movement was a dual movement. First, typical of the Southern civil rights struggles, it mobilized and organized black people against racial segregation, voter disenfranchisement, and for inclusion into the city's body politic. Second, the movement organized against racial segregation at the Crown Zellerbach Corporation; the largest employer and taxpayer in Bogalusa and Washington Parish. In 1965, Crown Zellerbach was one of the largest paper manufacturers in the US. Headquartered in San Francisco, California, Crown Zellerbach's Bogalusa plant practiced job discrimination

against black people and maintained segregated labor unions among its black and white workers. The most progressive leadership the Bogalusa Civic and Voters League enjoyed during its existence emerged in 1965 from among black laborers at Crown Zellerbach, who were the organizers and leaders of the black local of the Pulp, Sulphite and Paper Workers union.

In 1965, a dietician at a local medical clinic and two workers and union leaders at Crown Zellerbach came to lead the Bogalusa Civic and Voters League and organize the Bogalusa movement. Unlike traditional civil rights organizations of the time, the League organized a self-defense unit. It formed a chapter of the Deacons for Defense and Justice to serve as its armed defense entity to protect the black community and civil rights workers from the vigilante violence of the area Ku Klux Klan and Bogalusa's rabid, all-white police force. The leadership of the League personified a longstanding fervor among black working people to demand and organize for change in the racial order. The formation of the Deacons represented the League's strategic and tactical defense of the lives of black people. In 1966, the Bogalusa Deacons would become one of the organizational models employed by Huey Newton and Bobby Seale in the founding of the Black Panther Party in Oakland, California.

THE BOGALUSA MOVEMENT captured national attention during the 1960s. Black people made a decisive effort to challenge their own subordination and end the racial nadir

that had defined black life for more than fifty years. This essay provides a descriptive analysis of the Bogalusa movement and attempts to locate its importance as a significant and groundbreaking Black Power episode in the larger Southern civil rights struggles of the 1960s. It is organized into four sections. First, I describe the setting out of which the Bogalusa movement evolved. Second, I describe the origins of the Bogalusa movement and its leadership development. Third, I assess the self-defense character of the movement with the advent of the Deacons for Defense and Justice. Finally, I provide a summary conclusion of some of the major factors that shaped the movement and its significance.

Setting: The Rise of Bogalusa as a Company Town

BOGALUSA is located in southeastern Louisiana, approximately 45 miles north of New Orleans, in what is known as the Pearl River Valley. Its name is taken from the Choctaw people who inhabited the region before white people entered the area at the turn of the twentieth century. In Choctaw language the words *bogue lusa* means “dark or smoky waters,” which describes the flowing creek that runs through the middle of the city. During the 1960s, Bogalusa was, and remains, the largest municipality in Washington Parish, with a population of 20,000 people. In 1906, Goodyear Industries of Buffalo, New York developed Bogalusa as a mill town. When brothers Charles and Frank Goodyear brought their migrating lumber operation to southeastern Louisiana, they found a place of virgin pine forest, a flowing creek, white sands, and the Choctaw people. Before long, the Choctaw were driven out and the Goodyear brothers were well on their way to constructing their “Magic City.” From Buffalo, the Goodyear brothers cut a wide swath down through the Appalachian foothills, setting up lumber camps and mill towns.

Although it was the “cut-out-and-get-out” era when the Goodyear brothers arrived in what would become Bogalusa, they decided to settle because the area had the major ele-

ments for constructing a saw mill and establishing a railroad.¹ The Goodyear brothers had purchased land in southern Louisiana and Mississippi between 1880 and 1905. Their plan was to build the world’s greatest lumber plant, raise a New South city on the banks of the Bogue Lusa Creek, and establish the New Orleans and Great Northern Railroad to run through Bogalusa from New Orleans to Jackson, Mississippi. The Goodyear brothers received a charter from the state of Louisiana to place their town, its mill, and its railroad under the auspices of the Great Southern Lumber Company.

BOGALUSA was incorporated on July 4, 1914. The town was chartered under a commission form of government. William Henry Sullivan, the General Manager of the Great Southern Lumber Company, became the first mayor of Bogalusa. He held the mayor’s office from 1914 to 1929. By 1914, the Goodyear brothers had also achieved the feat of establishing the largest saw mill in world. Bogalusa grew up around the saw mill and became one of the most developed and self-sufficient towns in southern Louisiana and Mississippi.² The Goodyear brothers, through The Great Southern Lumber Company, built schools, houses, hotels, a hospital, and a general store. They owned the banks, supplied the electricity, and employed the police force. They had established a true company town and made Bogalusa a brand name.

The Great Southern Lumber Company shaped and dominated life in Bogalusa from 1906 to 1936. In 1936, the Gaylord Container Corporation of St. Louis, Missouri purchased the Great Southern Lumber Company.³ In 1938, after the last virgin timber was felled, the saw mill closed down. By 1942 the Gaylord Container Corporation opened a new pulp and paper mill. For seventeen years, Gaylord maintained the same dominance over the town that had characterized the reign of the Goodyear brothers, William H. Sullivan, and their Great Southern Lumber Company.

In 1955, Gaylord became a subsidiary of the Crown Zellerbach Corporation. In addition to making boxes and manufacturing paper, Crown expanded the operations to

include bag manufacturing. Like Great Southern and Gaylord before it, Crown maintained complete dominance over the town and complied with the racial order that had been established.

RACE has been the primary social factor in the Bogalusa since 1906.⁴ The mill town brought a wave of skilled and unskilled black labor into Bogalusa. Black people were a common commodity around lumber camps.⁵ As laborers, they participated in a number of union-organizing efforts. In Bogalusa, they joined the carpenters' union and the timber workers' union. The membership of the timber workers' union was 75 percent black. However, all its officers were white. Black life was thoroughly circumscribed within the "colored quarters," where by 1920 the Great Southern Lumber Company proudly announced that "everything was done to keep Negro citizens healthy, happy and productive." It was commonly accepted, according to Charles W. Goodyear, who wrote in his 1950 history of Bogalusa, "that no white man in Washington Parish ever was convicted of the murder of a Negro until the twentieth century."⁶ Lynching, as was the case throughout the South, was commonplace in Bogalusa. A 1903 lynching of a black man, who had been suspected of murdering a white woman, typified the character of white violence against black people in southeastern Louisiana at the turn of the twentieth century. The accused black man was tied to a tree and burned. His murderers then ambushed a black church meeting and killed fifteen persons.⁷

During its first three decades, Bogalusa's population was approximately 40 percent black. White racial violence generally defined the relationship between black and white people. Black people in Bogalusa were expected to show deference to whites and endure white prejudice as a matter of course. The Goodyear brothers laid out the town so that the saw mill was built to separate the black and white sections. Black people faced the constant threat of lynching and official repression from Mayor William H. Sullivan and his force of deputy sheriffs. However, black people were never cowed into complete submission by such threats of lynching and repression.

BLACK PEOPLE in Bogalusa and Washington Parish developed a level of independence through land ownership and material self-sufficiency. Black farmers developed their own farmers' league. Many black farmers also supplemented their livelihoods through industrial wage work at Great Southern. It was through wage employment that black workers developed residential enclaves, such as Poplas Quarters and Richardsontown, in order to evolve culturally as the mill town grew more racially segregated. In these communities, black people built their houses, churches, and places of recreation. They organized barrelhouses to dance and have a good time. Baseball became the major sport for black people in Bogalusa over its first six decades. During the 1930s, black people boasted of having some of the best baseball teams in the South. The Bogalusa team was called the Bogalusa "Y Tigers." They competed against teams from New Orleans, Baton Rouge, Mobile, Alabama, and various teams in Mississippi. On occasion, Negro League clubs such as the Baltimore Elite Giants, the Chicago Brown Bombers, and the New York Cubans barnstormed through Bogalusa. Some baseball players from Bogalusa went on to play in the Negro baseball leagues.⁸

In addition to a passion for baseball, black people in Bogalusa evolved from the barrelhouses a love for swing music, which had become the "most popular musical form in many Southern mill towns." From the late-1930s through the 1940s the Rhythm Aces was the most popular swing band. As well as performing in Bogalusa, the Rhythm Aces traveled regularly between Jackson, Mississippi, Mobile, Alabama, New Orleans, and Baton Rouge.⁹

As cultural vehicles, baseball and swing music gave black people the means to connect to the national black commercial culture and spurred the transit of black people moving across the southern region and other parts of the US for much of the first three decades of the twentieth century. Although Bogalusa was racially segregated and black people were legally not permitted to par-

ticipate in its government and public life, they developed their own cultural capacities that would increasingly serve them well as the civil rights movement approached by the 1950s. In this context, black people developed a sense of human autonomy within the “semi-independent” residential enclaves they had built since the town’s settlement.

IT IS OUT of this cultural crucible that black people would start the Bogalusa movement. By the 1950s, black people could see the beginning of the end of the racial nadir. In terms of public life, they had remained in a menial position; contributing their labor but never participating in the political decisions that governed their lives. All city and parish governmental decisions on taxes, school policy, and community development were made by exclusively white officials, elected at large, with no ties to the black community. During its first sixty years, Bogalusa typified New South development where cooperation in economic matters went hand in hand with separation in social and political matters.

Black people had been kept in their place, but the tide was about to turn. After the 1944 *Smith v. Allwright* decision outlawing the white primary, the end of World War II, and the 1954 *Brown v. Board of Education* decision declaring “separate but equal” unconstitutional, civil rights struggles took shape throughout the South. The first effort by black people to register to vote in Bogalusa occurred in 1950. Although it failed, it signaled the beginning of the long protracted struggle for inclusion and autonomy. The Bogalusa Civic and Voters League was formed in 1956 after the state of Louisiana banned the NAACP. Over the decade of the 1960s, the League would organize and lead the Bogalusa movement.

The Origins of the Bogalusa Movement and Its Leadership Development

WITH THE PASSAGE of the 1964 Civil Rights Act and the 1965 Voting Rights Act, civil rights struggles and voter registration efforts took on new momentum throughout the South. The Bogalusa movement began in earnest in the spring of 1964 when the

Bogalusa Civic and Voters League decided to test Bogalusa’s compliance with the 1964 Civil Rights Act. The specific activities included dismantling racially segregated water fountains in public facilities like the Washington-St. Tammany Parish Charity Hospital; the desegregation of all public spaces, retail, and commercial venues; the end to the at-large election system that prevented black persons from running for public offices in Bogalusa and Washington Parish; the desegregation of the city police department and the parish sheriff department; and the end of school segregation despite the fact that the *Brown* decision had been national law since 1954.

In addition, from the very beginning, the Bogalusa movement evolved as a dual struggle. The Crown Zellerbach Corporation practiced racial discrimination in hiring and promotion and was duplicitously complicit with the existence of segregated labor unions. Crown had been unionized since 1939. Workers belonged to the United Papermakers and Paperworkers union but in segregated locals. The movement drew its initial support and strength from Crown’s black union members, who had acquired organizational skills and the acumen for collective action.

The Bogalusa Civic and Voters League’s executive secretary and treasurer, Gayle Jenkins, figured prominently in the origin of the Bogalusa movement. Jenkins was the wife of Monroe Jenkins, one of the workers and union members at Crown. As the movement unfolded, Gayle Jenkins would prove to be its catalyst.

JENKINS was known for her magnetism and fearlessness. Age thirty-eight at the start of the movement, Jenkins enjoyed great respect and reverence within the Poplar Quarters community. Her home became an early base of operation for planning and organizing various activities. Jenkins’ commitment to the movement soon took precedence over everything else. When her boss at the local Desporte Clinic, where she worked as a dietician, forbade her to participate in the movement, she quit her job. When the then governor, Gov. John McKeithen,

attempted to get the “little radical woman” out of Bogalusa by offering her a secretarial job at the state capital at fifty thousand dollars a year, she refused.¹⁰ She never compromised her leadership position nor did she marginalize herself. Everyone knew and respected Gayle Jenkins. To be sure, while the civil rights movement writ large was a male-led and dominated movement, the Bogalusa movement was an exception. There is high probability that the Bogalusa movement would not have occurred if not for Gayle Jenkins.

The Struggle Against a Segregated Town

THE CONDITIONS and bases to ignite a full-fledged movement against racial segregation in Bogalusa and at the Crown Zellerbach Corporation grew out of the cultural foundation black people developed over five decades of struggling to eke out a life of promise and possibility for their progeny. In 1956, after the state of Louisiana legislature enjoined the NAACP from operating in the state, the Bogalusa Civic and Voters League was organized to represent the agency of black people. The formation of the League demonstrated black people’s capacity to end the racial nadir that had structured life in Bogalusa. The League was comprised of twenty-two members. Their agenda included equal opportunity in employment, desegregation of all public accommodations and facilities, the integration of the city police force, the integration of the schools, access to city sewage, paved streets, street lighting, and inclusion on city and parish boards and councils.

BY SPRING of 1964, when CORE came in to assist the League with testing Bogalusa’s compliance with the Civil Rights Act of 1964, the League had already organized a base of operation and developed strategies for mobilizing for demonstrations. The first test of compliance was with local banks. CORE’s presence brought national attention on Bogalusa. The first day of testing occurred without any incidents or conflicts. According to Gayle Jenkins, without CORE’s involvement, on the second day of testing, “all hell broke loose.”¹¹ White reaction to the second day of testing set

the stage for the use of violence against black people to convince them that Bogalusa would not desegregate under any circumstance, including, and especially, the mandates of federal law. Black people in Bogalusa knew this all too well and were prepared to defend themselves against such violence.

The two days of testing resulted in the resignation of the League’s president and vice president. In addition, the mayor of Bogalusa told the League to persuade CORE not to return to Bogalusa. Angered by these developments, black people rallied in large numbers and were spurred to militancy, demanding that the League reorganize with different leaders. Gayle Jenkins took the lead to find new male leadership. She turned to the unionized workers at Crown Zellerbach. Jenkins convinced two union leaders and former union presidents, A.Z. Young and Robert “Bob” Hicks to accept the presidency and vice presidency, respectively. Jenkins remained executive secretary and treasurer. With the new leadership in place, the Bogalusa movement set out to execute the League’s agenda and embark upon persistent protests and demonstrations against the city government, the retail sector, and the Crown Zellerbach Corporation.

Under the new leadership, the League organized a chapter of the Deacons for Defense and Justice. The Deacons would serve as a protection force for the black community and civil rights workers who came to Bogalusa. Equally important, the Deacons helped erase the fear that many black people had long experienced. The reinvigorated League expanded beyond its initial agenda to a wider goal: a comprehensive program of racial betterment, involving militant tactics. Protests were organized to achieve basic rights and the removal of unconstitutional laws. Demands for equal employment opportunities and the end of segregated unionism were made to the Crown Zellerbach Corporation. A.Z. Young, who was forty-two years old when he assumed the presidency of the League, was a World War II veteran, a worker and a union leader at Crown. His militant leadership style was established at the first rally held by the League’s new leaders when Young demanded to know from his audience where they stood:

Will you let your sons and daughters be hit by billy clubs, have live snakes thrown at them, have cigarettes put on their bodies, and be chased by police dogs on picket lines and marches, while you stay at home? They are risking their lives; are you risking yours?¹²

Young made clear that he would not, like the previous League's presidents, abandon them, insisting: "I am your leader; you are my followers." From this mass rally the Bogalusa movement was born. Young would prove to be defiant and definitive in his leadership style. He was known for his oratory and his assured confidence that Bogalusa would become the "proving ground of the South" in desegregating public life.

ROBERT "BOB" HICKS, also a worker and union leader at Crown, was thirty-six when he accepted the League's vice presidency with similar fervor as Young. Hicks was the quiet "intellectual" to Young's defiant orator. More methodical in thought and action, Hicks promoted the idea of organizing a chapter of the Deacons for Defense and Justice. The idea came to Hicks while he was trying to protect three CORE workers who were staying at his home. After being told by the Bogalusa police chief that a lynch mob was after the CORE workers and he would not provide protection for them, Hicks summoned help from neighbors and friends. Fifteen armed men came to Hicks' home and stood watch. After this incident, and several others involving physical contact with vigilant whites and members of the Klan, Hicks and others invited the leaders of the Deacons for Defense and Justice of Jonesboro, Louisiana to visit Bogalusa in order to instruct them on starting a chapter of the Deacons. From the beginning, the Deacons served a protective purpose for the movement. Hicks made the announcement at a mass rally that a chapter of the Deacons had been formed in Bogalusa to protect civil rights workers and to make sure white people did not enter black neighborhoods at night:

We're gonna patrol. And, like the policemen who are running you down and say, "You speeding," then we pull up on them and say, "What's the matter," and the policemen say, "He speedin'." And we say, "We didn't see him speed, and when the policemen see we armed just like they is—a white man's just like anybody else—they gonna let you go when they see you gonna attack them back."¹³

Although, the Bogalusa Deacons would have a president, Charles Sims; an insurance salesman and taxi driver known for his toughness, Hicks was the chapter's founder and leading voice in articulating the role the Deacons played as the self-defense arm of the League.

The League also organized a Youth League to assist in mobilizing and organizing students and youth. The Youth League was led by Don Expose, Gayle Jenkins' oldest son. Don was quite popular among high school students. He was very articulate and seemed a natural organizer. At most rallies, Don and other youth leaders would arouse the masses for the major speeches that would follow.

During the course of the movement, the League organized protests and demonstrations against the city government to demand the inclusion of black people in city jobs, membership on boards and councils, the integration of the police force, and representation on the city council. The League also took action against the local retail stores, demanding the hiring of black persons as clerks, against the segregated school system, and against all public facilities practicing racial discrimination. Protests and demonstrations were also organized against the Washington Parish government, demanding the inclusion of black people. The League protests and demonstrations were rarely carried out without responding to some form of violence from whites. Over a five-year period, black people remained vigilant and determined to end *de jure* and *de facto* racial segregation. CORE and SNCC workers assisted in the organizing and voter education and registration, and attorneys from the Lawyers Constitutional Defense Committee (LCDC) filed legal suits and represented black people in various civil rights cases. Despite the support of outside allies, the Bogalusa movement was decidedly led and organized by local people. This was especially the case in the struggles against the Crown Zellerbach Corporation.

The Struggle Against Crown Zellerbach Corporation

WHEN the Crown Zellerbach Corporation purchased the Gaylord Container Corporation and made it a subsidiary it brought prosperity to Bogalusa. The addition of a bag

plant gave white workers exceptional and disproportionate benefits. With the exception of a few black porters, the bag plant was staffed entirely with whites. Crown also employed several hundred white women but no black women. In 1960, Crown modernized its operations, resulting in a drastic reduction of its workforce. The black and white unions fought against the layoffs. In August 1961, the white union called for a strike. The black workers voted against the strike because "they felt that white workers were primarily interested in defending their own privileged position."¹⁴ The strike lasted seven months and it deepened the split between the black and white workers. Crown laid off approximately five hundred workers, reducing its workforce to twenty-nine hundred. Less than four hundred of the twenty-nine hundred were black. Crown was a thoroughly segregated workplace. The separate lines of progression ensured that white workers were promoted faster and higher and received higher pay than black workers. White workers were not supervised by black individuals. As was the case with the City of Bogalusa, Crown was never inclined to change the segregated practices at its plant.

By 1963 Crown was pressed by the federal government to end its segregated practices. In spring 1964, Crown instituted a new policy of testing applicants for promotion, and allowed black workers to bid for jobs in the "white" line of progression. However, by the end of 1964 only four black workers had entered the "white" line of progression. The remaining 340 black employees worked as porters or loaders. These minor reforms were met with great resistance from white workers. In the bag plant, the one black worker who was placed in the "white" line of progression returned to his portering job after white workers threw bolts at him. White workers stopped using the cafeteria when Crown abolished segregated seating. The cafeteria closed. Whites refused to use the newly desegregated showers. Black workers did not use the newly desegregated toilets for fear of being harmed. By most estimates, at least a hundred white workers at Crown were members of the Ku Klux Klan.

KLAN AGGRESSION increased in response to the minor reforms at Crown and the demands black people made to desegregate Bogalusa. Random violence and threats of violence became a daily occurrence. Harassment of whites who were deemed friendly to black people became the rule. City officials who made any attempt to comply with federal desegregation laws were threatened. And state and federal officials were quite timid in preventing the threats, harassment, and violence. The Bogalusa Civic and Voters League and CORE made appeals to Crown's San Francisco headquarters to publicly oppose the Klan, intercede with city, state, and federal officials, and support the League's demands. Crown leadership refused to intercede. Insisting the racial crisis in Bogalusa a local problem to be handled by its Bogalusa plant manager, Crown declared: "We don't believe in trying to run a town ... Crown could not promote social reform or lay down the law to Bogalusa." Asserting that "an employee's private life is his own," the San Francisco headquarters also made clear that it would not undertake any action to rid the Bogalusa plant of klansmen.¹⁵ Crown submitted it had clean hands and was committed to fair employment and compliance with the 1964 Civil Rights Act.

The League countered with a daily boycott and picketing of the retail stores on Columbia Street, the main shopping district in Bogalusa. Despite constant harassment and threats from the Klan, the boycott and picketing continued well into the summer of 1965. It was aided by a US Department of Justice suit against six segregated restaurants. This was the first legal intervention in Bogalusa and the Department of Justice's first suit to integrate public accommodations in Louisiana.¹⁶ Black people fought against the Klan, city and state officials, and against Crown Zellerbach.

The efforts resulted in Crown conceding to the League's demands to negotiate a settlement. In July 1965, A.Z. Young, Robert Hicks, and Gayle Jenkins pressed for the promotion of black workers, the hiring of black women, and an end to all discriminatory practices. Following the negotiations, Crown merged its segregated lines of progression. The end of the

segregated unions resulted from a complaint of discrimination against Crown that Hicks filed in federal court. The Department of Justice supported the complaint. In 1968 a federal court decision brought a final end to Crown's racial discriminatory hiring practices and segregated unions.¹⁷

THE TRIUMPH over Crown and racial segregation in Bogalusa came as a result of the determination of black people to test Bogalusa's compliance with the 1964 Civil Rights Act. It took the militancy of black people to withstand violence, threats, harassment, and reprisals. Victory, such as it was, did not come without the loss of black lives. Most notable was the summer 1965 ambush of the first two black Washington Parish sheriff's deputies. O'Neal Moore and Creed Rogers were shot while patrolling in Varnado, a town just north of Bogalusa. Moore was shot in the head and killed instantly. Rogers was wounded in the shoulder. A suspect was apprehended across the Mississippi state line. Ernest Ray McElveen, a forty-year-old Crown Zellerbach laboratory technician, was arrested and charged with Moore's murder and the shooting of Rogers. At the time of his arrest, McElveen had membership cards in the National States' Rights Party and the Citizens Council of Greater New Orleans in his possession. However, like so many other cases involving the killing of black people by whites during the civil rights struggles, the case against McElveen was dropped for "lack of evidence." (To this date, no one has been brought to justice for the killing of Moore and the wounding of Rogers.) The self-defense strategy of the League emerged from this context of violence and the struggles against the city of Bogalusa and Crown, which also gave rise to the formation of the Bogalusa chapter of the Deacons for Defense and Justice.

The Self-Defense Character of the Movement: The Deacons for Defense and Justice

SCHOLARS continue to analyze the civil rights movement in order to situate developments and activities in their proper context. For example, scholars grapple with the question of whether Black Power was a

phase of the civil rights movement or a different and separate development. Such is also the case with understanding the role of self-defense during the civil rights struggles. We know that the traditional civil rights organizations eschewed the use of self-defense tactics. A most noted exception is the case of Robert F. Williams, the NAACP leader in Monroe, North Carolina, who armed himself in 1961 to defend his family and community against white violence. Williams was removed by the national office of the NAACP and later fled into exile to Cuba.¹⁸

The Bogalusa movement differed from the larger civil rights movement that was non-violent in tactics and strategies. From the beginning, protest orientation shaped the Bogalusa movement and self-defense became a tactic of protection. White violence was embedded in the civil society and political culture of Bogalusa. The city police force, the parish sheriff department, and major public and private sector entities such as the Crown Zellerbach Corporation included members of the Ku Klux Klan. Without protection from governmental authorities in Bogalusa, black people had to utilize self-defense.

As noted above, Robert Hicks advanced the idea of starting a chapter of the Deacons in Bogalusa after the city police chief refused to provide protection for CORE workers. Leaders of the Jonesboro, Louisiana chapter were invited to Bogalusa to instruct the League on establishing a chapter of the Deacons. As Charles Sims, president of the Bogalusa Deacons, noted:

When the white power structure found out that they had mens, Negro mens[,] that had made up their minds to stand up for their people and to give no ground, would not tolerate with no more police brutality, it had a tendency to keep the night-riders out of the neighborhood.¹⁹

Sims considered the Deacons a "defense guard unit," who viewed the use of weapons as "self-protection," and who armed themselves at the objection of local, state, and federal authorities "because we got tired of the women, the children being harassed by the white night-riders."

Sims (and the Deacons) maintained that their right to bear arms was protected by the US Constitution and Louisiana state law, observing quite elegantly:

I think a person should have the right to carry a weapon in self-defense, and I think the Louisiana state law says a man can carry a weapon in his car as long as it is not concealed. We found out in Bogalusa that that law meant for the white man, it didn't mean for the colored. Any time a colored man was caught with a weapon in his car, they jailed him for carrying a concealed weapon. So we carried them to court.²⁰

Sims was always clear that the Deacons used their weapons for defense only. The existence of the Deacons brought an end to the white night-riders riding through the black neighborhood.

THE DEACONS conducted their business with by-laws that each man had to learn, understand, and abide by before he became a member. Each member had to pledge his life for the defense of justice, for black people, and the civil rights workers. The Deacons also had the responsibility of transporting civil rights workers into and out of Bogalusa.

In addition to their protection work, Sims believed that the presence of the Deacons in Bogalusa changed the way white people thought about black people. With acuity, Sims observed:

See, the Southern white man is almost like Hitler in the South. He has been dictating to the Negro people, "Boy, this," and "Uncle, that," and "Grandma, go here," and people's been jumpin'. So he gets up one morning and discovers that "Boy," was a man, and that he can walk up and say something to "boy" and "boy" don't like what he say, he tell him to eat himself—you know And then if he blow up, there's a good fight right there. So the man goes back home and sit down and try to figure out the Negro. Shortly after that we had several rallies. And I guess he received his answer—we told him a brand new Negro was born. The one he'd been pushin' around, he didn't exist anymore.²¹

As Sims saw things, white people stopped driving through the black neighborhoods throwing things at houses, randomly beating people and harassing women.

FROM ITS FOUNDING in 1965 through the end of the 1960s, the Bogalusa chapter of the Deacons for Defense and Justice was successful in defending black people and civil rights workers with great courage and conviction. They operated within the constraints set forth

by the League. Most of the Deacons were not known by name. Outside of Bogalusa and Washington Parish, Robert Hicks and Charles Sims were the two most familiar names linked to the Deacons. In Bogalusa most black people knew the Deacons personally because their ranks were filled with men who had always been recognized for their courage and bravery in the face of many confrontations with whites since before the beginning of the Bogalusa movement.

The Bogalusa Deacons acquired a reputation and respect across the nation. Most notably, when James Meredith, the first black student to integrate the University of Mississippi in 1962, decided to continue his June 1966 "March Against Fear" from Memphis, Tennessee to Jackson, Mississippi after being shot by a white man in Hernando, Mississippi; the Bogalusa Deacons and Deacons from the Jonesboro and New Orleans chapters provided protection for the march. The presence of the Deacons on the Meredith march was most significant because it had the support of Martin Luther King Jr., who had agreed to continue Meredith's march after he was shot. King's decision represented a 180-degree shift from where he previously stood on the Bogalusa movement and the Bogalusa Deacons. At the height of the Bogalusa movement, King refused to come to Bogalusa because, having committed himself to the philosophy and strategy of non-violence, he did not want to be identified with the League and its use of self-defense. Meredith, who regretted that he did not bring a gun on his first attempt to march on June 2, 1966, welcomed the Deacons when he returned to complete the march.

THE DEACONS also provided protection for the League's August 1967 105-mile march from Bogalusa to Baton Rouge. The march was a clear indication that the League had grown in its confidence that self-defense had made a major difference for black people in Bogalusa and elsewhere in Louisiana. Similarly to the Meredith march, the Bogalusa to Baton Rouge march was also a march against fear, because in order to get to Baton Rouge the marchers had to travel through the Klan stronghold of Livingston Parish. Despite being

attacked in the Livingston Parish town of Sattsuma and learning that the bridge over the Amite River was wired with explosives, the marchers made it to Baton Rouge. Governor John McKeithen was forced to dispatch the state police and the Louisiana National Guard to protect the marchers on their last leg to the state capitol. H. Rap Brown, one of the leaders of SNCC, was the major speaker at the Baton Rouge rally.

Black Power and Self-Defense

THE LEAGUE and the Bogalusa Deacons are clear examples of how the Black Power tendency emerged from the traditional civil rights movement as an indigenous, organic development among local people struggling against racial domination in the South. The self-defense tactic was integral to the successes that the Bogalusa movement achieved during the high point of its activism. As the self-defense apparatus of the Bogalusa Civic and Voters League, the Deacons proved that the civil rights movement could practice self-defense as a protective strategy while articulating some of the traditional rhetoric of “nonviolent, direct activity.” While the Deacons have become nearly synonymous with the Bogalusa movement, they left a singularly indelible mark on the greater mid-twentieth-century black freedom struggles in the US.

Conclusion

THE BOGALUSA MOVEMENT began in 1965 the same way civil rights struggles had evolved throughout the nation. Its primary aims were to end *de jure* and *de facto* racial segregation and argue for the inclusion of black people into public life. The initial activity involved testing the city’s compliance with the 1964 Civil Rights Act. Subsequently, with the passage of the 1965 Voting Rights Act, the Bogalusa Civic and Voters League made voter registration a central plank on its agenda to acquire and sustain access to a full economic and political life. What distinguished the Bogalusa movement was the adoption of armed self-defense as a vital tactic in achieving its broader goals. As outlined

above, the League had little recourse but to defend the black community and civil rights workers against the organized, violence of white public officials, the city police force, the parish sheriff deputies, and the Klan-infused workforce at the Crown Zellerbach Corporation. The leadership of the League knew that it could not conduct a successful campaign of protests and demonstrations without being able to respond in an organized manner to the profound racial violence hitherto perpetrated against black people without impunity.

The Bogalusa movement was also distinguished by the fact that a woman was its catalyst and a member of the League’s leadership triumvirate. Gayle Jenkins was not a by-product of the Bogalusa movement. Rather she sustained the movement in every aspect of the work she did as an organizer and leader. Jenkins’ force of personality and will provided the example that many other women, men, and youth needed to help make their commitment to the movement. Moreover, Jenkins always kept her sight on the larger goal of making life better for all black people.

When A.Z. Young and Robert Hicks were persuaded to assume the positions as president and vice president of the League, they brought with them years of experience organizing workers at the Crown Zellerbach Corporation and negotiating for better working conditions for Crown’s black labor force. They were very familiar with whites’ intransigence to change the status of black people. They came into their leadership positions with a militancy acquired over several years of struggle against Crown’s local corporate elite and with white union leaders and workers at the Bogalusa plant. Young and Hicks were secure in their personalities and independent in their thinking.

AS A LEADERSHIP TRIUMVIRATE, Jenkins, Young, and Hicks did not experience any difficulty convincing black people they had to be committed and dedicated to a struggle that would not necessarily yield immediate results. Each benefited from the respect and admiration they enjoyed before the start of the movement. They were

entrusted to honor the belief and confidence that the people placed in them to not compromise the collective interest for individual gain. The people viewed the leadership as equals and they treated each other as equal. Young and Hicks knew that without Jenkins, the League probably would not have survived and the movement probably would not have come to fruition.

Along with pursuing legal suits against the city, the segregated school system, and the Crown Zellerbach Corporation, the League sustained its protests and demonstrations through the end of the 1960s. The initial suit against the Bogalusa school system resulted in a "freedom of choice" plan allowing a few black students to attend the white schools while still maintaining the basic racial pattern. In 1969, the Lawyers Constitutional Defense Committee filed a suit on behalf of the League for full desegregation of the schools. The federal district court ruled in *Jenkins v. City of Bogalusa School Board* that the Bogalusa school system had to fully desegregate. With the start of school in fall, 1969 the League had achieved the full desegregation of the city schools. However, that first year of full school desegregation involved many protests by black students demanding full participation in all school activities.

IN THE ELECTORAL ARENA, victory would not come for black people until 1976. In 1967, Hicks failed in his bid to become the first black school board member and Young failed in his bid to become the first black member of the Washington Parish Police Jury—the parish governing board. In 1970, Young failed in his bid to become Bogalusa's first black mayor and David Johnson, Jr., the first general vice president of Local 189 of the International Paperworkers Union at Crown, failed in his bid to become the first black commissioner of streets and parks. In 1971, three black persons ran unsuccessfully for the school board. Sustained legal pressure by the League and the Washington Parish NAACP from 1971-1976, forced the city of Bogalusa to remove the at-large election system resulting in the establishment of single-member election districts. The Bogalusa City School also ended its at-large election system. In 1977,

Gayle Jenkins and Robert T. Young, the brother of A.Z. Young, were elected as the first black school board members. Jenkins remained on the school board for 28 years. The first black persons were elected to the Bogalusa city council in 1978.²²

In addition to serving on the school board, Jenkins remained the person that black people could turn to if they had any problem with local white authorities. By 1972, Young retired from Crown and worked in various appointed positions in state government. In the late-1970s, Hicks became the first black supervisor at the Crown Zellerbach plant. When he retired, Hicks was still the only black supervisor at Crown.

WHILE there were many players in the Bogalusa movement, Jenkins, Young, and Hicks led with great intelligence, wit, and militancy. The cultural milieu that made and shaped black people from the founding of Bogalusa had informed their sense of historic obligation and sustained them in the tumultuous and violent times of the mid-twentieth century. Their courage to lead had been shaped by the legacy of black working people, who had developed their own culture in order to survive and prosper in a southern Louisiana mill town. Young died in 1993 at age 70. Jenkins died in 2002 at age 75. Hicks died in 2010 at age 81. Their legacy will forever be enshrined in the history of the civil rights and Black Power movements. The Bogalusa movement is a testament to what local people did in the 1960s to end the racial nadir and find their own agency for emancipatory transformation.

Endnotes

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