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Muckraking and C.O.B.Y (Cry of Black Youth): Uncovering a History of Organizing in Belle Glade

Raymond A. Hamilton
University of South Florida, rayhamilton3rd@gmail.com

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Uncovering a History of Organizing in Belle Glade

by

Raymond A. Hamilton

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Major Professor: Eric Duke, Ph.D.
Cheryl Rodriguez, Ph.D.
K. Stephen Prince, Ph.D.

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Dedication

This thesis is dedicated to all of the people who encouraged, supported, and challenged me on the journey to attain my Master's Degree. My Mother and Father, thank you for instilling values in me which have shaped me into the man I am today. Niki, thank you for nudging me to begin this journey towards a higher degree; you have supported me in ways that for which I can never truly express my gratitude. Dr. Duke, Dr. Rodriguez, and Dr. Kissi, thank you for demanding more from me and pushing me to be better than I thought possible. Brandy, thank you for everything, I could not have come this far without you. The review sessions, the proofreading, bouncing ideas off of one another; all those things helped me to get to this point. Erica, thank you for bearing with me as I inched towards the finish line, words can never express my appreciation.

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Abstract

This thesis examines a local activist group in the rural town of Belle Glade, Florida during the late 1960s and early 1970s. This research falls in line with many New Black Power studies. These New Black Power studies challenge existing notions of the Black Power and Civil Rights eras and their relationship to one another. It challenges the timeframes, geography and ideology of both of the eras. This case study of a the group in Belle Glade is not the first to examine the similarities of the Black Power and Civil Rights eras, where many groups who affiliated with the Civil Rights Movement and shifted towards Black Power tactics, it does present an interesting dynamic of a group which self-identified as a Black Power group to an approach more associated with the Civil Rights Movement. The methods used in the in studying the COBY, the moniker of the group, included archival research from newspapers and city commission meeting minutes. Additionally, ethnographical research methods were also used in the form of personal interviews. This thesis will add to the scholarship of New Black Power studies by providing another example of groups in history which challenge existing notions of two distinct movements in the Civil Rights and Black Power eras.

Introduction

In the city hall of Belle Glade, Florida, for a special meeting for the city commission to hear grievances on the issue of police brutality, hundreds of citizens pile in. One by one they approach the microphone to relate their encounters with local police officers and perceived injustices they endure. Some relay stories of being arrested for cursing. Others tell accounts of being threatened with physical violence. Regardless of the injustice experienced at the hands of local law enforcement, the community organized and began to advocate for their rights. History has many eras in which this event can be placed. Recently, beginning in 2014 with the Black Lives Matter movement, scenes of organizing against police violence are commonplace, especially in major cities across the United States. This instance took place decades before, however, not in the 1960s, not in a major city but in a small, rural farming community in South Florida.

The 1960s and 1970s were decades that saw a great deal of activism in the United States. African American organizing for their rights took place in both decades. Belle Glade, Florida was one of those locations. In the late 1960s and into the first few years of then1970s, Belle Glade was the setting for organizing which attempted to thwart the existing status quo that relegated many of the black citizens of Belle Glade to second class status, including, but not limited to, police violence against its citizens. This thesis will examine how one group named

Cry of the Black Youth (COBY), stood up to the white power structure in Belle Glade and served as the voice for the black community whose voices were often times silenced

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Background of Belle Glade

Belle Glade, Florida is a small rural town in western Palm Beach County, situated towards the center of the State of Florida, at the southernmost tip of Lake Okeechobee. The city, along with one other city and two townships (Pahokee, South Bay and Canal Point) are collectively referred to as the “Glades” and less formally as the “Muck.” Belle Glades sits 40 miles west of the Palm Beach County seat in West Palm Beach Florida. While West Palm Beach may conjure thoughts of pristine beaches and large homes, Belle Glade has no such scenery. Surrounded for miles by sugarcane and produce fields, leaving West Palm Beach and driving the 40 miles west seems like entering a different world. A community whose economy relies on agriculture from a few large farms and sugar corporations is rife with poverty. The area is given the name the “Muck” due to the rich black soil to which the area owes is agricultural successes. The motto of the city of Belle Glade is “Her Soil is Her Fortune,” attesting to the fact that a large percentage of the industry, and subsequently the jobs, in Belle Glade are due to the muck. Though agriculture may be the lifeblood of the area, it leaves the economy successful only seasonally. Drawing parallels between the antebellum South and its plantation economy and the agriculturally based economy of Belle Glade, controlled by a few wealthy farm owners, would not be a far reach, not only in the 1960s and 1970s but presently. There are sometimes in the area when much of the agriculture us out of season and therefore so are the jobs. Data reports that the area’s average per capita income has, since before 1970 through today, been only slightly above the national poverty line. In comparison, the average per capita income in the County seat of West Palm Beach is almost double that of Belle Glade in the census years.[1]

In 1970, the population of the city was just over 15,000 with fifty-three percent of the population "Negro." These figures do not include much of the migrant worker population who traveled around the county following the agricultural seasons and the jobs they provided which would increase the Negro population significantly. The issue of who would count as citizens would be raised again when the racial issues which affected the city were brought to the attention of the city commission and issues such as citizenship in regards to voting were raised.

The area has had an extended history of racial tensions, most often between the white farm owners and the black workers. Even when statutes on desegregation were passed in the state, Belle Glade seemed to be behind. For example, the state passed a law following the Supreme Court ruling, that all counties must "end segregation of schools with all deliberate speed," in 1957, yet Belle Glade's schools were not integrated until 1971, and even then it faced much backlash specifically from the white community. This was typical of many of the areas in the Deep South, but not necessarily South Florida. Voting rights was another issue which divided Belle Glade along racial lines. While the Voting Rights act of 1965 was passed nationally, there were groups advocating for some of those same rights in Belle Glade even in 1968. Many of the large farms that controlled the agriculture in the area had housing for the workers, much of which was subpar, strikes and riots concerning the housing, many of which involved claims of racial issues, span back until the mid-1950s in Belle Glade.

Overall, there are a few issues which make Belle Glade an important setting for the case study in this research. Its isolation from the rest of the county allowed for many of the issues

[1] The Census years referenced are 1970, 1980, 1990, 2000, and 2010. U.S. Census State and County Quick Facts.

facing the city to remain outside the realm of the county and relegated to the decisions of the city commission. The poverty issues in the city set the stage for activism within the human rights struggle. The racial issues which faced the city along the lines of human rights concerns like housing, education and autonomy was another. Finally, the breakdown of white to black population, even without including the migrant workers who were not in the city for the entire year, laid the grounds for activism regarding representation in city government. The group that would be at the center of much of this activism, albeit for a short period of time, was COBY.

Research Questions

Initially there were several questions regarding Belle Glade that could have been examined. The plethora of dynamics that intersect in Belle Glade could be approached from numerous different angles. Intra-racial including the migrant versus permanent black population of Belle Glade is one angle. International issues regarding the laborers, mainly from the Caribbean, which came to the city seasonally to work in the fields is another issue, especially since there were several documented cases of organizing, unionizing and even going on strike.[2]

The questions which can be raised about the aforementioned dynamics in Belle Glade are numerous, but the focus of this research will be on the activism that occurred within the city and in direct relation to the city commission which was the governing body of the city of Belle Glade. The questions which guide the research of this thesis are: What dynamics in Belle Glade

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[2] The farmworkers formed a union which encompassed many migrant workers across Florida and other places in the United States. There were also two cases of Jamaican cane cutter strikes which took place at the sugar plantations in and around Belle Glade. The questions raised from the intersectionality of these forms of activism and the activism which took place in Belle Glade within the city for the more permanent residents are extensive and cannot be answered in within the confines of this thesis. The group which is the focus of this research was involved directly with many of the migrant groups. These areas are definitely worth exploring and I plan on delving into those dynamics as part of a more extensive study in the future, perhaps as part of a dissertation.

created the need for activism for the black community in Belle Glade (including race relation and human rights issues)? What forms of activism took place in Belle Glade? Was any activism effective at creating change? What challenges did those who advocated for the black community in Belle Glade face?

Methodology

When attempting to answer the questions which guide this research, archival research was a major focus. Database searches on activism and protest brought some of the activism from the 1960s to the forefront. Newspaper articles were a major source of information. Both the Belle Glade newspaper and the county newspaper provided a great deal of information regarding the Belle Glade and the activism which took place there in the 1960s.

Additionally, city commission meeting records proved to be the most invaluable source however. Spending hours in the city hall of Belle Glade combing through the meeting minutes from the years which came up in my newspaper articles provided a great deal of insight into what happened in Belle Glade in the 1960s. Reading through the minutes to find any of the issues which were related to racial issues in the city proved fruitful. Advocacy groups which made appeals to the city commission showed up in the mid-1960s and again in the late 1960s and early 1970s. The city commission meeting minutes were the first exposure to COBY for this research, which eventually led back to more newspaper articles.

Outside of the city commission meeting minutes, the record keeping from the era of study in Belle Glade became less meticulous. Sources on some of the city's interracial committees were never located. Copies of newsletters used by the advocacy group also eluded this research.

The second methodology which was used was personal interviews. The group which is the focus of this research had many leaders. Many of those leaders did not want to speak on the issues which faced Belle Glade. However, one of the founders of the group provided an interview which helped fill in some of the blanks. Additionally, a law enforcement officer from the time covered in this research also granted an interview. Finally, a member of the legal firm which worked hand in hand with the activist group which this research focused on provided and interview as well.

Purpose

The purpose of this thesis is fourfold. First, my research on the Black freedom struggle in Belle Glade adds to the growing scholarship on grassroots organizations and the local dimensions of the Civil Rights Movement. Local organizations advocating for the rights of the black community is one of the main characteristics of the grassroots organizing. Often times these grassroots movements were not initially associated with any of the more visible national groups such as the NAACP. As a matter of fact, this research will show little involvement by that group in Belle Glade until after their local level organizing had begun. Creating a more complex picture of the Civil Rights Movement, COBY, from Belle Glade will add to current scholarship on the local level organization which paints a more comprehensive picture of the Civil Rights Movement.

Secondly, this study demonstrates how local activism simultaneously employed philosophies and tactics associated with both the Civil Rights and Black Power movements. The examination of the activism which occurred in Belle Glade in the late 60s and early 70s represents a cross section of activism that merges many of the characteristics of the Black Power

Movement with those of the Civil Rights Movement. The militancy and separatism of COBY employed many of the characteristics associated with Black Power while protecting and fighting for the rights of the black citizens of Belle Glade. At the same time, they utilized peaceful protest and petitions for change by local government that would benefit the black community, very similar to the characteristics of the Civil Rights Movement. The group, while working in the years which followed the traditional period of the movement, did promote many of the ideals of the Civil Right group which are included in traditional period scholarship. They fought for fair housing, representation in local government, and the franchise. COBY's history further challenges the notion that the Black Power Movement represented the end of the decade long advances made in regards to interracial relations. It shows that the ideologies and tactics of both Civil Rights and Black Power were more closely related than traditional scholarship on both movements assume. COBY represents an intermingling of the two related movements rather than a purely dichotomous relationship of two separate developments.

Thirdly, the history of COBY in Belle Glade challenges the traditional periodization of the Civil Rights Movement. COBY organized in the beginning of 1969 and was active through 1971. Although traditionally considered the Black Power era, as noted above, they displayed characteristics of both Civil Rights and Black Power eras. This is specifically related to COBY in that they initially identified as a Black Power groups which practiced autonomous methods that many Black Power organizations adopted, and then shifted towards an approach in which they worked within the system, specifically with the City of Belle Glade city commission, to get laws changed in order to improve the issues faced by the black community in Belle Glade, an approach more popular in Civil Rights era activism.

Muckraking and COBY also challenges the traditional geographic parameters of both the Civil Rights and the Black Power movements. Despite being a part of the U.S. South, scholarship on the Civil Rights Movement in Florida, particularly southern Florida, lags behind in the number of studies of many other southern states more associated with these freedom struggles. Therefore, this research on COBY, an organization which fought for the rights of the black citizens in a small, rural town in South Florida adds another example of grassroots organizing to the historiography from an area that is underrepresented. Likewise, the group's militant focus with an initially separatist approach provides a glimpse into characterizations often associated with Black Power groups.

Literature Review

Civil Rights and Black Power are both movements that stir memories and emotion on many levels. Both evoke images of race relations between whites and blacks, represent challenges to the existing status quo of the white power structure, and sought to provide improved opportunities for black people in the United States. These movements are not often presented as parallel to one another but rather in succession to each other. In many cases Civil Rights and Black Power are presented as dichotomous and separate. In more recent years there have been several authors which challenge some of these traditional notions. New Black Power Studies focus on the ideologies of both Civil Rights and Black Power were used simultaneously. This thesis fits in with the scholarship that challenges the notion of two separate ideological movements.

New Black Power Studies addresses many of the misconceptions of the traditional scholarship. First, both are more complex than the general assumptions associated with them; Secondly, they are more closely linked than many of the common facts would dare present. Finally, the two movements are in actually a collection of smaller movements which occurred nationwide. While the events of Civil Rights and Black Power are often assumed to be part of grand scale mass organization by national groups, there is also large amount of local level organizing that took place. These local and grassroots movements have increasingly become the focus of recent scholarship on both Civil Rights and Black Power as part of the larger Black Freedom Struggle.

There are several accepted and widely distributed misconceptions about both movements in older scholarship. The Civil Rights Movement is often presented as a specific period in American history that began in 1954 and conveniently wrapped up just over a decade later in the year 1965. As Jaquelyn Dowd Hall notes in her article “The Long Civil Rights Movement,” the popular Civil Rights Movement, covers the period *Brown v. Board of Education* that outlawed segregated schools through the Selma March that lead to the Voting Rights Act of 1965.[3] Much of the historiography of the movement also presents it as a homogenous movement in which all black people played a part with the same mindset. Nonviolent protests engaged in civil disobedience aimed to change laws that would improve the status of black people specifically in the fight against Jim Crow and Disfranchisement, primarily in the U.S. South. Another characteristic of much of the existing scholarship outside of the past two decades of scholarship, also takes a “top-down” approach to analyzing the Civil Rights Movement. Charismatic leaders who, despite long odds and with the backing of the church, paved the way for most black people to gain freedoms and rights they had been previously denied with the eventual aid of the federal government. Large scale organizing led by national groups which preached a common ideology across the nation is the presented as the basis for the movement. The historiography of the Civil Rights Movement is also restricted regarding geography. The Jim Crow South is the home of the Civil Rights Movement. Deep South states like Alabama, Mississippi, Georgia and Louisiana are presented as the home to much of the movement’s anecdotes and analysis, while places peripheral to the South such as Florida are often overlooked the annals of Civil Rights history.

Such histories of the Civil Rights and Black Power eras represent only a portion of the history of these movements and the actual reach and impact that they had in the United States,

[3] Jacquelyn Dowd Hall, "The Long Civil Rights Movement and the Political Uses of the Past," *Journal of American History* (2005): 1233.

chronologically, ideologically and geographically. Additionally, these two movements overlap and coincide in many ways not necessarily identified in the popular versions of history. In recent years, scholarship on these eras have presented a more comprehensive picture of the Civil Rights and Black Power Movements and challenged the focus and notions of two distinct periods.

Jaquelyn Dowd Hall argues the civil rights activism of 1954-1965 is but a part of a Long Civil Rights Movement which spans back to the New Deal Era and pushes forward to the 1970s in which it inspired a "movement of movements".[4] This challenges popular chronologies and views of the Civil Rights Movement such as Bayard Rustin's neatly packaged decade of the Civil Rights Movement between the mid-1950s and the mid-1960s - the "classical period of the movement." Historiography of the Civil Rights Movement has not included the context which preceded and followed the decade of the 1954 *Brown vs. Board of Education* decision and concluding with the passage of the *Civil Rights Act* and *Voting Rights Act* of 1964 and 1965, and many times excluded the events leading up to or following this decade.[5] Black Americans have been fighting for 'civil rights' they have been denied for many years. In her book *Freedom Struggles*, Adrian Lentz-Smith chronicles the attempts that Black American soldiers around World War II, made at gaining full citizenship and the rights that accompanied that citizenship.[6] After experiencing the interaction of both black and white soldiers from other nations worldwide, black soldiers began to fight the status quo that relegated them to second class citizens at home while others accepted them as brothers in arms on the warfront.[7] These struggles mirror many of

[4] Hall "Long Civil Rights," 1235-1236
[5] Hall "Long Civil Rights," 1235-1236
[6] Adriane Danette Lentz-Smith, *Freedom Struggles African Americans and World War I*. (Cambridge, Massachusetts: Harvard UP, 2009).
[7] These are not the only cases which challenge the traditional scholarship. Ortiz challenges this by examining the activism for human rights in Florida following emancipation in his book *Emancipation Betrayed*. Paul Ortiz, *Emancipation Betrayed,* (Oakland: University of California Press, 2005).

the struggles for citizenship of the 'popular Civil Rights Movement,' yet occurred decades before the so-called 'classical period' of the movement.

Additionally, the Civil Movement is presented as a movement of charismatic leaders in an attempt to secure the rights of many of the working class Black Americans who could not advocate for themselves. Church leaders are often presented as the catalysts of the Civil Rights Movement while most of the citizens who benefitted from the movement sat idly by waiting to be saved by those same charismatic leaders. Not mentioned very often is the fact that many of those leaders coopted existing grassroots organization. Leaders such as Martin Luther King Jr. and organizations such as the Southern Christian Leadership Conference (SCLC) often overshadowed the events and struggles which took place in the efforts to organize locally that they took part in. Despite such presentations of civil rights, leaders such as Ella Baker were opposed to national leaders and organizations overshadowing the efforts of local, grassroots organizing and often were at odds with those leaders in regards to their approach and tactics. There were many groups that were just as important to the movement and less known within the historiography. Groups such as the United Christian Movement Incorporated (UCMI) founded by C.O. and Dorothy Simpkins in Shreveport, LA and the Alabama Christian Movement for Human Rights (ACMHR) founded by Fred and Ruby Shuttlesworth in Birmingham, AL, were examples of this.[8] The UCMI and the ACMHR were focused on the grassroots level of organizing. They allowed any and everyone who was willing to fight for the rights of black Americans to be a part of their organizing. Instead of solely Christian preachers, these local level groups included even the characters such as the town drunk "Papa Tite" as part of their efforts.

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[8] Barbara Ransby, *Ella Baker and the Black Freedom Movement: A Radical Democratic Vision*, (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina, 2003).

The geography of the Civil Rights Movement is also restricted by much of the traditional historiography. Largely limited to the U.S. South, little is mentioned outside of this area. Urban centers in the Northeast, Midwest and Western United States are not the first place that comes to many minds when presented with the question of where the Civil Rights Movement took place. In the North, large cities such as Newark, NJ contained organizations fighting for rights and expressed their displeasure with de facto segregation. Washington, D.C. experienced Civil Rights protest led by local groups, not just the national groups such as the NAACP who aided in organizing protests such as the March on Washington for Jobs and Freedom. In the mid-1940s, a local group founded by philanthropist, Edwin Embree, and African American economist, Robert C. Weaver, in conjunction with members of the NAACP, wrote a 91 page report on the status of segregation in Washington, D.C.[9] In her book, *Dissent in Wichita*, Gretchen Cassel Eick documents the sit-ins in Wichita, KS in the late 1950s.[10] This area of the Midwest was far from the Black Belt of the U.S. Additionally, in his article “Justice is Slow but Sure,” Quintard Taylor provides examples of civil rights activism in areas such as Colorado, Nevada and California.[11] One of his examples included acts of civil disobedience in San Francisco organized by James Baldwin in support of a campaign in Birmingham, Alabama in 1963. Even areas in the South in which Civil Rights activism and organization took place are often left out of the popular tales of the movement. Florida is one of those areas. Florida is not often mentioned in the discussion of where the Civil Rights Movement occurred. There are mentions of Florida however. Harry T.

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[9] Wendell E. Pritchett, "A Local and National Story: The Civil Rights Movement in Postwar Washington, DC." A Local and National Story: *The Civil Rights Movement in Postwar Washington, DC*.
[10] Gretchen Cassel Eick, *Dissent in Wichita: The Civil Rights Movement in the Midwest, 1954-72*, (Urbana: University of Illinois, 2001).
[11] Quintard Taylor, “Justice is Slow but Sure": The Civil Rights Movement in the West: 1950-1970," *Nevada Law Journal*: Vol. 5: Iss.1, Article 6.

Moore was one of the first field officers for the NAACP on Florida.[12] He went to great lengths to fight for the rights of Black Americans in Florida, but many times even lifelong black citizens of the state are oblivious to his contributions. Unfortunately, many of the mentions of Florida are limited to examples with ties to larger national organizations. There exists a similar approach when referring to the traditional historiography of the Black Power Movement. Such studies place it in a post-Civil Rights context so that the Black Power era followed the Civil Rights era. Black Power is often presented as a retreat from the organized and peaceful tactic of the movement, and characterized by reckless militancy aimed at undermining the existing power structure while simultaneously undermining the decade of gains made by the Civil Rights Movement. Peniel Joseph notes that prevailing wisdom of the Black Power movement "black nationalism inspired an emotional racial separatism that triggered the end of interracial alliances and the collapses of key civil rights organizations."[13] Armed black militants are presented in defiance to authority. The images brought to mind of the Black Power Movement are in stark contrast to the peaceful attempts at equality of the Civil Rights Movement. Similar to the geographic misconceptions of the popular Civil Rights era, the Black Power Era also has geographical limitations. Black Power and its militant advocates were confined to the urban centers outside of the South. Widespread images of the Black Panthers of Oakland and Chicago come to mind when many think of Black Power. Aside from Stokely Carmichael's famous mention of the words "Black Power," in Greenwood, Mississippi, the South usually is not mentioned when most tales of Black Power are told. Authors such as Timothy Tyson do mention the South. In his book, *Radio Free Dixie*, he chronicles the activity of Robert F. Williams and his

[12] Caroline Emmons, ""Somebody Has Got to Do That Work:" Harry T. Moore and the Struggle for African-American Voting Rights in Florida," *The Journal of Negro History* 82.2 (1997).
[13] Peniel Joseph, "The Black Power Movement: A State of the Field," *Journal of American History* (2009): 751-76.

armed self-defense approach while he was a leader within the NAACP.[14] Located in North Carolina, Tyson shows the methods that Williams utilized as a local chapter president of the NAACP, which were often in contrast to what the organization tried to do nationwide.

In the same way that the timeline of the Civil Rights Movement is skewed within traditional scholarship, the Black Power movement has also experienced misconceptions that more recent scholarship is challenging. One of the assumed hallmarks of Black Power is the idea of militancy. Images of armed black citizens willing to protect their black communities from the status quo, and a willingness to physically fight for those communities and their rights if need be is synonymous with Black Power in the minds of many. Recent Black Power scholarship, including Tyson's book, extends the timeline of black militancy well before the established Black Power timeframe which exists after the traditional Civil Rights time period.[15] Armed self-defense is the centerpiece of the ideology of historical figures such as Robert F. Williams in his book *Negroes with Guns.*[16] Williams posits that black communities were willing to protect their communities with violence. Even as a prominent member of the national civil rights organization, the NAACP, Williams was an advocate of armed defense and violent responses to violent attacks on black communities when necessary. His book documents the willingness for militancy from the late 1950s through the publishing of his book in 1962. His example is just one that challenges the timeframe of the Black Power Movement.

Another way the traditional Black Power Movement scholarship has been challenged is in the geography of the movement. As mentioned previously, the Black Power Movement usually puts the heart of the movement took place in the North, Midwest and the West in large

[14] Timothy B. Tyson, *Radio Free Dixie: Robert F. Williams & the Roots of Black Power,* (Chapel Hill: UNC Press, 2001).
[15] Tyson, *Radio Free Dixie*
[16] Robert F. Williams, *Negroes with Guns*, (Detroit: Wayne State University Press, 1998).

cities. Again Williams contests the geography because his black militancy took place in North Carolina, part of the Black Belt of the United States. Other scholars also present areas outside of major urban centers where the Black Power characteristic of armed defense of the black community comes from the authors Akinyele O. Umoja and Simon Wednt. Umoja examines the events of the Mississippi Freedom Movement during 1964. In his book *We Will Shoot Back*, he provides details of armed defense in the area of McComb, Mississippi, in areas known for the peaceful protests to counter white violence during the Civil Rights Movement.[17] Wednt also looks at areas in the South which adopted the policy of armed militancy in the vein of Black Power although outside of its most widely known locales. Wednt identifies groups such as the Deacons for Self Defense and Justice in Jonesboro, Louisiana as well as the Tuscaloosa Citizens for Action Committee in Tuscaloosa, Alabama. In *The Spirit and the Shotgun*, Wednt makes mention that these groups used armed self-defense, in many instances to protect the members of the non-violent aspects of the Civil Rights movement.[18] This scholarship simultaneously challenges the geography of the militancy of the Black Power Movement while linking militant groups, most often mentioned as Black Power groups, directly to the achievements achieved by many Civil Rights organizations. Additionally, while there is mention of militancy and Black Power in the South, there is not nearly as much scholarship that focuses on the areas outside the regions of the Black Belt in efforts to protect the organizing efforts of Civil Rights activists, especially not in Florida.

Extensive research exists on both the Civil Rights Era and the Black Power Era. While traditional research of both focuses on the relationship of the larger national groups and the

[17] Akinyele O. Umoja, *We Will Shoot Back: Armed Resistance in the Mississippi Freedom Movement,* (New York: NYU Press, 2013).
[18] Simon Wendt, *The Spirit and the Shotgun: Armed Resistance and the Struggle for Civil Rights,* (Gainesville: University Press of Florida, 2010).

organizing efforts to further the goals of those groups, there has been a wave of research which focuses on the local level organizing aside from the national groups and examined that grassroots level organizing through its own lens. In recent years, academics have focused on the local level goals of the grassroots organizing efforts of both movements.

Some of the scholarship looks at a large collection of local level organizing. In his article "Debating the Civil Rights Movement: A View from the Trenches," Charles Payne argues that the efforts and the goals of the larger level leaders and groups were secondary to the goals of the local level organization.[19] This grassroots organizing was specific to the needs of the local people and simply coincided at times with the goals of the national groups. In a similar vein, focusing on a collection of grassroots organizing, *Groundwork* is a collection of essays edited by Jeanne Theoharis and Komozi Woodard.[20] The essays contained within this collection documents the local, smaller scale organizing efforts which in turn contributed to the larger successes of the national level Civil Rights Movement.

Some of the scholarship on grassroots level organizing focuses on groups that were part of the grassroots organization in many different areas. Such is the case in Wesley Hogan's *Many Minds One Heart: SNCC's Dream for a New America.*[21] Hogan focuses on the organizing efforts of the Student Non-Violent Coordinating Committee in registering people to vote in the rural areas of the South. Her book documents the efforts of the group under the advisement of Ella

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[19] Steven F. Lawson and Charles M. Payne, *"A View from the Trenches." Debating the Civil Rights Movement, 1945-1968*. (Lanham, Maryland: Rowman & Littlefield, 1998).
[20] Jeanne Theoharis and Komozi Woodard. *Groundwork: Local Black Freedom Movements in America* (New York: NYU Press, 2005).
[21] Wesley C. Hogan, *Many Minds, One Heart: SNCC's Dream for a New America*, (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina, 2007).

Baker, who opposed the efforts of larger national organization to absorb the group and take advantage of the work in local organizing they had done.

Other scholarship has focused on specific case studies of grassroots level organizing. Emilye Crosby focused on the efforts of SNCC specifically in a rural county of Mississippi in her book, *A Little Taste of Freedom: The Black Freedom Struggle in Claiborne County, Mississippi.*[22] This research examines a specific area in which the group conducted grassroots organizing. Another example of research that looks at the local level efforts of a specific group outside of the larger national organizations is *Bloody Lowndes: Civil Rights and Black Power* by Hassan Kwame Jeffries.[23] Jeffries examines the efforts of local organizing to address the needs of the black population of Lowdnes County, Alabama. This example of scholarship on grassroots movements makes the correlation between the Civil Rights Movement and the Black Power Movement. It challenges the existing scholarship which separates the two movements. It also challenges existing geography of Black Power by focusing on a group in a rural area of the South.

While all of this scholarship does a great job in examining local level organizing in the Black Power and Civil Rights movements, there still exist gaps in the historiography. Similarly to the traditional scholarship, much of the grassroots organizing that has been examined is in the traditional U.S. South, leaving out other areas even in the South such as Florida. While Jeffries does challenge the existing geography of Black Power by examining a rural area in the South as opposed to an urban center elsewhere in the nation, there a not many other scholars who examine the areas in which elements of the Black Power Movement and the Civil Rights Movement are

[22] Hogan, *Many Minds, One Heart.*
[23] Hasan Kwame Jeffries, *Bloody Lowndes: Civil Rights and Black Power in Alabama's Black Belt*, (New York: NYU Press, 2009).

closely tied. This research will address some of those gaps. Similarly to Jeffries study of Lowndes County, this research will examine the crossroads of grassroots organizing in a rural area while simultaneously documenting the relationship between Civil Rights and Black Power. Another gap in the historiography that this research will attempt to fill is the role of the State of Florida in both movements. It will close the gap between the two movements, add another example of grassroots organizing to the annals of the two movements, and extend the geographical reach that is ascribed to each of the movements.

While the mention of Florida is limited, including works like *Emancipation Betrayed* by Ortiz, even he does not look into the rural areas of South Florida. MuckRaking and COBY will examine specifically rural Belle Glade in South Florida. Using the group COBY, this thesis will draw parallels between the Black Power and Civil Rights Eras. This case study will add directly to the grassroots scholarship and help create a more comprehensive history of the movements.

Chapter 1: A Need for Activism

In the fall of 1969, Jerry Roberts returned to Belle Glade, Florida fresh from his tour in the United States Air Force. One afternoon while Jerry was in the downtown area of Belle Glade, Florida, Roberts watched as a police officer stopped and searched a preteen black boy. The young man cried from the overwhelming experience as the officer told him to "Spread 'em!" Having never been accosted by the police, the young black boy was confused and did not immediately comply. The officer proceeded to kick the young boy's legs from under him before eventually arresting him. On a different occasion downtown, Roberts observed another instance involving police and an elderly black man. The man was harassed by a police officer, who prepared to arrest him. It is unclear if the elderly black man said something to the officer but Roberts claimed it seemed that the older man was merely moving too slow for the officer's liking. The officer subsequently struck the elderly man across his lower back, after which he shrieked in pain and collapsed to the ground. Several passersby notice the incident. Some looked on with disdain for the actions of the officer, while others continued with their routines, apparently feeling they could not do anything about the situation. The man was arrested by the officer who struck him, having been assaulted and obviously in pain, and now faced charges unknown to anyone but the officer responsible for the physical agony he experienced.[24]

[24] Jerry Roberts, Personal Interview, 8 March 2013 (subsequently cited as Roberts Interview).

Unfortunately, in Belle Glade, these scenes occurred often and were commonplace in the downtown section of Belle Glade. Throughout the 1960s, and most certainly prior to that, mistreatment of black members of the community, occurred at the hands of law enforcement. Black citizens confronted by Belle Glade police officers were often mistreated, manhandled, and then arrested for what seems to be minimal offenses.[25] However, the social norms of the city at the time did not allow black citizens to fight back even though they felt the abuse was legally and morally wrong. Such images conjure up thoughts of the Jim Crow South. Yet these happenings occurred in 1969, five years after Jim Crow statutes were outlawed. However, like many areas in the US, the black community of Belle Glade faced police brutality against its black citizens, all done in an attempt to relegate those citizens to second-class status. Such events were accepted as a reality of black life in Belle Glade, but never completely forgotten.[26] It would take action on the part of the citizens of Belle Glade to stop these occurrences from being so commonplace.

Activism in Belle Glade

Activism in the 1960s was widespread in the United States – from Civil Rights, to post-civil rights, and anti-war protests against US involvement in Vietnam. These events occurred in many different areas of the country and were often covered in newscasts and newspapers, making them known even in areas which experienced little such activism.

Belle Glade has its own history of activism in the 1960s on behalf of the black community, some of which proved successful. Some of the most noted activism centered on the

[25] *City of Belle Glade, City Commission*, Special Meeting 15 June 1970. Records located at Belle Glade City Hall, Office of the City Clerk (subsequent citations of Belle Glade City Commission meetings will be Belle Glade City Commission followed by the date).
[26] The instance of police and citizen interaction occurred in 1968 but never brought up until a special meeting with the city commission in July of 1970. *Belle Glade City Commission*, 15 June 1970.

black laborers, particularly among migrant workers who did not live in the city.[27] This included organized protests on local sugar plantations by migrant workers' unions and cane cutters strikes and uprisings in both 1965 and 1969. These organized protests occurred on the grounds of the large farms and sugar cane corporations and while they included some of the members of the local black community, it did not directly affect day to day of the community. A Bi-Racial Council (later named the Interracial Council), was formed in the early 1960s, and it worked hand in hand with the city commission to address issues involving race relations. Another advocate was the Negro Citizens Group which was the most visible in the fight for the rights and everyday needs of the black community.[28] But much of the activism experienced in Belle Glade either did not include the everyday needs of the black community in Belle Glade as a whole, or were not very successful in changing the dynamics which afflicted the those in that community.

"Her Soil is Her Fortune" is the motto of the City of Belle Glade because the nutrient rich, black soil there contributes to the success of the large corporate farms and sugar plantations which thrived in the area.[29] The town has relied on the farming and sugar cane industries for generations. This was also the case in the 1960s as well. Therefore, it is not surprising that the first forms of activism in this era centered on these industries. Around 1964, the rise of the first farmworkers union came about in the United States including branches that represented the farmworkers in Belle Glade. In 1964 and 1965, with significant assistance from the Florida Rural

[27]"Cane Cutters Riot, Set Building on Fire" *The Palm Beach Post*, 8 March 1965, p. A1.
[28] Belle Glade City Commission, 23 August 1965. The Negro Citizens Group is mentioned in the city commission meeting minutes but there are no other sources with which to provide information on this group.
[29] "Welcome to the City of Belle Glade Government Portal." *Welcome to the City of Belle Glade Government Portal*. Web. 1 Aug. 2014. <http://www.bellegladegov.com/>.

Legal Services (FRLS), the union was created.[30] The United Farmworkers of America (UFW) focused on the rights of migrant workers from outside of the United States, and focused on such issues as the wages they received and the quality of housing provided by farm owners for these workers. While this activism was beneficial for the workers who traveled to wherever work was available, it did little to address the needs of the local African American community in Belle Glade. Because many of these farms were outside the city limits of Belle Glade, the city itself and the local black community were not benefitted by the actions associated with the migrant workers. The main concern of the city as a whole was the economic contribution of these workers to the city when they were in town for the harvest seasons.

In another episode connected to migrant labor issues, cane cutters organized to address wage and housing issues only in later years.[31] There were at least two documented uprisings involving cane cutters from the British West Indies in which violence erupted in conjunction with the demands of the workers in 1968 and 1972.[32] In both cases, workers fought for fair and competitive wages and adequate housing. The farm owners, in lieu of addressing the issues, simply had the workers detained and eventually sent back to their home countries. The role of the City of Belle Glade in these cases was once again, economically motivated. The concern of the city remained the money that these workers spent in the city and the deficiency to the local

[30] "Belle Glade Migrant Workers Form Union," *The Miami News*, 21 June 1966. Outside entities also assisted in the creation of this union such as the American Federation of Labor and Congress of Industrial Organization (AFL-CIO), the Southern Student Organizing Committee and even the United States Secretary of Labor, Willard Wirtz,

[31] "Cane Cutters Demonstration and Arrests," *St. Petersburg Times,* 21 September 1972, p. C1.

[32] "Talisman Sugar President Denies Union Slave Claims," *The Evening Independent*, 24 February 1972, p. 2A.

economy from the strikes and subsequent deportation of the workers.[33] Such events produced few benefits for the black community at large for the time.

Despite such an environment, the records of the city commission meetings include accounts issues that raised concerns of negative effects on the local African American community. In the mid years of the 1960s, the board of the Community Methodist Church, composed of the black members and deacons, which serviced African American parishioners, repeatedly requested for the city to deny the petition of the local Alcoholic Beverages Dealers to extend the hours of permissible sale of liquor in the city.[34] This board along with the other ministerial leaders went to the city commission to block these efforts citing that they would be detrimental for the African American community. While this group did approach the city government with issues that they felt were for the betterment of the areas where black citizens resided, there are no other issues brought forth to the city commission by this group, suggesting that sale of alcohol in the black neighborhoods was their primary concern when it came to city government. While not dismissing the importance of the concerns of the church leaders in deterring the extension of hours to sell alcohol, and its significance to the community in question, there remained other, more pressing issues. These included, but were not limited to fair housing, equal representation in city government, and police brutality.

Belle Glade's Bi-Racial Council attempted to address such racial issues directly with the city commission. Created by the city commission of Belle Glade in the early years of the 1960s, the Bi-racial Council included community leaders with equal numbers of white to black

[33] There is no mention of the cane cutters in any city commission meeting during the months in which the cane cutters strikes or uprisings occurred. While several news sources reported the incidents, there is no evidence that the city became involved in addressing the concerns of the migrant workers.
[34]*Belle Glade City Commission*, 27 January 1964.

members.[35] This committee may have been instrumental in addressing the needs of the African American Community. The council first appears in the city commission records in in a December 1965 letter demanding various nominations of African Americans to certain city appointed boards in response to a directive from the mayor in response to the activism of the Negro Citizens Group, a local black activist organization. City Commission meetings show some of the issues which were delegated to the Bi-Racial council.[36]

The Bi-racial Council held separate meetings from the City Commission to address issues that were specifically racial in nature, and would then present information back to the commission. The group also served as a liaison between the community and the city commission in regards to issues of race. Unfortunately, the commission meeting minutes seem to indicate that this council was figuratively handcuffed by the issue of maintaining an equal number of members of both races rather than addressing the racial needs and issues which plagued the city. The evidence suggests that if there was any disparity in the number of white members or black members, mainly when members moved away from the city, that the council would remain focused on replacing the member so the races had equal representation in the council.[37] The evidence shows that the Bi-Racial Council was more concerned with its composition than in taking action towards the racial issues which occurred in Belle Glade. The problem with this practice was that the procedure to replace members was arduous in the attempt to assure the best

[35] *Belle Glade City Commission*, 13 July 1964. This meeting was the first reference to the Bi- Racial Council on record in the 1960s. It references a meeting with the council which shows that the council was established before July of 1964. A second creation of a Bi-Racial Council in 1970 suggests that the original council was created by the city commission to address the racial issues raised by federal statutes concerning desegregation in the 1964.

[36] *Belle Glade City Commission*, 23 August 1965. J.T. Houston mentioned requests of the Negro Citizens Group and the commission delegated the tasks of addressing the concerns of the group to the Bi-Racial Council.

[37] *Belle Glade City Commission*, 8 November 1965. Bi-Racial Committee only comment during the entire meeting was the fact that the commission was short one member of the white race. The business of the group would be suspended until the group had equal representation of both races.

candidate for the council. This practice at times took weeks or even months to sort out. During those periods the only business addressed by the council was making sure representation was equal. Therefore there were very few issues that the council brought to the attention of the city commission. The activity of the Bi-racial Council in regards to the city commission was limited to the replacement of the members and the appointment of the city attorney as a legal advisor to the council. Many of the issues that were in the charge of the Bi-Racial Council concerning human rights, including but not limited to the treatment of the citizens by police officers were not addressed. At best, the group was an attempt to show some adherence to Civil Rights Legislation yet not actually effective.

One of the key activists that would directly benefit the African American community is Mr. J.T. Houston Jr. As a member of the Negro Citizens Group (NCG), Houston directly appealed to the city commission on behalf of the African American Community for representation in city government. In addition to the request made of the mayor to appoint several qualified black members of the community to city created boards, the NCG made other pleas. These appeals served as the first step taken in Belle Glade to solving some of the issues facing the black community there.

In August of 1965, Mr. Houston requested from the city commission "12 Negro policemen to patrol the African American Community," (at the time there were only 4 black officers). The hiring of more black policemen to patrol the black community was related to ongoing issue of white police brutality against Belle Glade's black citizens. He also asked that the city's borough system be changed due to the disparity it created in the representation of city government. The borough system was set up to give representation (in the form of city commissioners) to the three boroughs of Belle Glade. The North Borough, which represented about ten to fifteen percent of the population, a majority of which were white, was given two city commissioners. The Central Borough, or the business district, also represented ten to fifteen percent of the population, almost completely white, was given another two commissioners. Finally, the West borough which held between sixty to seventy-five percent of the city's population, and where almost all of the black citizens resided, was given one city commissioner. Additionally, most of the voting population in the West borough was in an area called Chosen, a predominately white neighborhood. A change in the borough system, which provided a disproportionate amount of city government representation to areas in which white voters lived, would present an opportunity to improve representation for the areas of the community in which most of the African Americans citizens resided, at least on the city commission. Finally the NCG requested that there be equalization of representation on appointed governing boards of the city.[38] The final request of the Negro Citizens Group was for increased African American positions on city appointed boards, which would assure the needs of the blacks were better represented.[39]

While the demands of the NCG were steps in the right direction, they were not immediately addressed by the city commission. Two weeks after the meeting in which Houston made the requests of the Negro Citizens Group, the city commission reconvened to address those requests. Mayor Williams speaking on behalf of the city commission responded:

1. There are three vacancies on the police force that have yet to be filled because of the lack of three qualified candidates.

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[38] *Belle Glade City Commission*, 9 August 1965. Houston outlines the requests of the NCG.
[39] Many sources including news articles and interviews gave mixed numbers regarding the borough system in Belle Glade. The sources consistently mention between 60%-75% of the population living in the west borough. Those same sources mention that the majority of black citizens lived in this borough. The actual numbers are difficult to delineate since the U.S. Census date only lists the number of citizens by race, poverty rate and age demographics and not broken down by boroughs.

2. A change in the borough system required and act of legislature and a referendum of the people.
3. The commission asks that you submit the names of candidates to the Bi-racial Committee and they would present the names to the commission.[40]

In regards to the responses, the city commission turned the requests back onto the group. The meeting seemed to have been a method of placating the group in efforts to dissuade such requests from the community. Each reply showed that the city was not eager to address the issues or the circumstances surrounding them. Regarding the first request for twelve black policemen to patrol the African American community, the city commission responded by saying there were three vacancies yet no qualified black candidates. No mention is made of criteria of qualification or suggestion of training programs to address an obvious need in a shorthanded police force. The Commission's response to the NCG's second request regarding the change in the borough system was dismissed as a legislation issue seemingly beyond their control. However, the city commission actually did have the ability to change or suggest changes to the borough system. Perhaps the biggest issue remained the point that the citizens who requested the change represented a miniscule portion of the voting demographic due to the precise system for which a change was being called. Additionally, the mayor claimed that even if the a change was agreed upon, a referendum of the people was needed, and as previously mentioned, the voting dynamics of the borough system would not likely allow for a change. As for the final request by the NCG, equal representation in city government boards, the commission gave the responsibility of addressing the needs of the group to the Bi-racial Council. As stated previously, this group did little but present names to the commission and did not accomplish much to change the existing

[40] *Belle Glade City Commission*, 9 August 1965.

racial disparity in the city.[41] While the community had a voice which called for change in the NCG, it was proven ineffective due to the lack of action on the part of the city.

Despite the appointment of Grear, racial problems persisted in Belle Glade even after his appointment. One of the most prevalent issues remained police brutality of the black community. In the years Grear served on the commission, that issue would show up time and again. This would be due, in part, to Jerry Roberts as a member of COBY, and his advocacy to initiate methods which would protect the black citizens from police brutality.

Black Power in the South

Jerry Roberts grew up in Belle Glade. He attended Lake Shore High School, the segregated black students' high school in the city, with Belle Glade High School still all white. Once Roberts graduated from high school, he joined the United States Air Force, as the options for most black graduates were college, the military or, a more negative fate to which some from Belle Glade fell prey - prison. His military service occurred during a time of tremendous upheaval worldwide. While the United States was entrenched in the Vietnam War abroad, activism was rampant stateside. In the late 1960, the face of activism had changed from earlier years. Gone were the images of peaceful marches by the likes of the Student Non-Violent Coordinating Committee (SNCC) and the Southern Christian Leadership Conference (SCLC), replaced by images of militant Black Nationalists or groups such as the Black Panther Party for Self Defense armed and ready to defend their community. The Black Panthers, founded by Huey P. Newton and Bobby Seale began their organization initially to help defend the African

[41] *Belle Glade City Commission*, 23 August 1965.

American Community in Oakland against police brutality. The images of the Panthers, visibly armed in public spaces, directly daring to the police department, was an inspiration for Roberts, who had seen the Panthers on the news while stationed in Turkey. The book *Soul on Ice* by Eldridge Cleaver also motivated Roberts to become involved in activism.[42] When he returned to the States from his time in the military, he acted on that motivation. He researched the Panthers and discovered that there were no Black Panther Party chapters in the state of Florida. Florida was not, however, without dynamic Black Power groups.[43]

Florida experienced several Black Power activist groups in the latter years of the 1960s. In St. Petersburg, Florida, a former SNCC activist, Joe Waller (later known as Omali Yeshitela), founded the Junta of Militant Organizations (JOMO).[44] This group was organized similarly to the Black Panther Party in California. The Black Rights Fighters, which was founded as a group to fight for the rights of black migrant workers, were established in Ft. Myers, Florida.[45] The Black Studies Group which was comprised of black students and intellectuals to address the needs of black citizens locally was founded in Gainesville, Florida.[46] The Florida Black Front, Moses Davis being one of the organizers and leader, was established in Jacksonville, Florida.[47] Daytona Beach, Florida had the Committee for the Defense of the Black Community, chaired by Pat Davis.[48] Miami had the Black African Militant Movement (BAMM).[49] Closer to Belle Glade, the

[42] Eldridge Cleaver, *Soul on Ice*, (New York: McGraw-Hill, 1967).
[43] Jerry Roberts Interview.
[44] African Socialists International. "African People's Socialist Party-USA - History."*African People's Socialist Party-USA - History*. <http://asiuhuru.org/ontheground/apsp-usa/about/history.shtml>.
[45] The Black Rights Fighters would join JOMO and the Black Studies Group to form the African Peoples Soicialist Party. African Socialists International. "African People's Socialist Party-USA - History."*African People's Socialist Party-USA - History*. <http://asiuhuru.org/ontheground/apsp-usa/about/history.shtml>.
[46] The Black Studies Group would join JOMO and the Black Rights Fighters to form the African Peoples Socialist Party. African Socialists International. "African People's Socialist Party-USA - History."*African People's Socialist Party-USA - History*. <http://asiuhuru.org/ontheground/apsp-usa/about/history.shtml>.
[47] "Florida Black Front." <http://www.bizapedia.com/fl/THE-FLORIDA-BLACK-FRONT-INC.html>.
[48] "Stokely Carmichael's Itinerary Secret," *The Daytona Beach Morning Journal*, 10 May 1968, p. 8.

city of Clewiston, Florida had the Harlem Tenants Association.[50] Many of these groups were served by people who had been active participants in the popular Civil Rights Movements; thereby showing how individuals in these new Black Power groups had been movement were present for and participated in the shift from Civil Rights to Black Power. Traditional scholarship presented these two movements as linked chronologically; with the Civil Rights movement preceding the Black Power Movement, yet these groups had leaders who sought the same goals within the two movements. What all of these groups had in common was the interest of the black people and their community.

All of these groups were active and dynamic Black Power groups in place in Florida when Jerry Roberts left the military. His interest in the work of these groups alongside the inspiration he received in his study of Black Power while overseas would have a profound effect once he returned to Belle Glade. In a similar vein of these Black Power groups, both in and out of the state of Florida, Roberts would seek to serve the interests of the people in his community by any means necessary.

Belle Glade Experiences "Black Power"

When Roberts' first returned to Florida in 1968, he worked in Miami for Southern Bell. On weekends, he would return to Belle Glade to see his parents and while visiting them he would go out to local clubs. It was during such a visit that he encountered the true police brutality which had become commonplace in Belle Glade. He described the mindset of white police officers against black citizens simply - if any wrongdoing was suspected "beat him in his head and arrest the nigger." Upon the passing of his father, Roberts returned to Belle Glade in 1969

[49] S. Nathan Enfield, "5 BAMM Members Convicted," *The Miami News*, 18 July 1972.
[50] "Harlem Tenants Make Rent Collection Offer," *The Palm Beach Post*, 7 January 1970, p. D5.

permanently to assist his mother. This move provided him a more thorough picture of the need to address the treatment of black citizens at the hands of the police department. His breaking point came with the arrests of the young boy and elderly man mentioned at the outset of this chapter.[51]

Roberts was not the only one who thought something should be done. Weekly, veterans were returning from tours of duty in the United States military. About the same time, there were some former convicted felons who received their parole, oft times whose arrests were at the hands of the same police officers whose they were observing, not to mention whose arrests often came along with much of the questionable activity of those same officers. Fast and lasting relationships which were developed with both the veterans and parolees would prove to be beneficial for what he did. Noticing the prevalence of the abuse at the hands of police, Roberts decided to organize.

Initially the group consisted of seventeen veterans who wanted to protect the citizens from the abusive tendencies of the police. The initial goal of the group was to confront the police department and their tactics head on in order to change the culture of police brutality "by any means necessary." The group realized that the officers would change work shifts in front of the Belle Glade jail. Therefore, this is when Roberts and his group patrolled the African American community to ensure the safety of the citizens from any possible misconduct at the hands of the police.

Roberts' and the group's concerns not only lay with the police, however. The group of veterans who had spent time in the military experienced racism while on tour and learned to react to this type of discrimination with armed resistance. Roberts claimed that some of these veterans were known to "tear a place up" if they experienced any racist activity. He described some of the

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[51] Roberts Interview. At the time that Roberts and the other veterans patrolled the group did not yet have a formal name.

members of this veteran group as "crazy in the head" with "Black Power" and willing to put their demolition expertise learned in the military to work if need be. Sentiments of this magnitude are testament to the level of anger from this small representation of the African American community in Belle Glade. Policing the police was the goal of this group of veterans at the outset, but their efforts would encompass much more and come to inspire the community.[52]

The group's patrols sparked interest from everyday people in the community. Their actions thwarted police violence, and others took. The veterans decided to open the ranks of their organization to the rest of the community as the interest increased as long as they were 'real' and concerned with the needs of the community. The group held a meeting in the Lake Shore Civic Center, located in the West borough of the city, the same borough that housed a majority of the community's black citizen. The first meeting of the group was in May of 1970, and had at least 250 young black men who were observant of, and fed up with, the actions of the police department.[53] The large number of people who attended this impromptu meeting showed the community's desire to organize, particularly when it came to protecting the black citizens of Belle Glade from police violence.

Police violence was the initial focus of the group and one of the biggest issues facing the black community. The records of city commission meeting do not indicate any mention of police brutality being presented to the highest offices of the city government. Even Houston's Negro Citizens Group did not mention it. The need was overtly apparent simply by the large number of people who wanted to have a share in a need for activism within the city, specifically to address police violence.

[52] Roberts Interview.
[53] Roberts Interview.

This first meeting brought together people from different walks of life. The group initially consisted of veterans who had spent time fighting for 'democracy' yet realizing some basic freedoms were not being afforded back home. The discipline of regimented life afforded them the opportunity to organize efficiently, while maintaining a fiery edge needed to address situations like police violence, through physical confrontation if need be. Additionally, the parolees were a part of the group. These were people who were willing to do whatever necessary to deal with the machinations of racist police officers, even in the face of arrest. Roberts describes the members of the group as people "who were ready to lay their life on the line if need be, to see justice served." The combination of discipline, and the potential for recklessness, both contributed to the initial success of the organization.[54]

Although discipline and militancy were defining characteristics of this group, they had no name. Roberts decided that the identity of the group had to be solidified, so the first order of business was to come up with a name. Several names were suggested, including "Blood Thirst" and "The Spook Who Sat by the Door" (the latter in reference to the novel by Sam Greenlee in which a city is turned on its head by the armed resistance of militant members of the black community in backlash against a system which treated black citizens as inferior).[55] The aggressive nature and rage expressed in some of the suggested names attest to the anger with which these activists viewed police brutality in Belle Glade. But the group was more than just "angry black men," a common stereotype of Black Power era activists, and armed resistance and counter-violence were not the only items that the group had on its agenda. After significant

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[54] Roberts Interview.
[55] Sam Greenlee, *The Spook Who Sat by the Door: A Novel*, (Detroit: Wayne State University Press, 1969).

debate, the name "Cry of Black Youth" was decided. "C-O-B-Y, COBY," would be the moniker.[56]

Conclusion

Several factors contributed to the creation of COBY in Belle Glade, Florida. The black community demanded a change in the status quo, which held the needs of the white community in esteem while overlooking the black community. While black activism existed in the city of Belle Glade, much of it included and benefitted people outside of the permanent residents black community of Belle Glade. Migrant workers and cane cutters from the Caribbean, often times in collaboration with larger, more connected national groups such as the AFL-CIO and workers unions mobilized for their needs, but did not directly assist the existing issues facing the black community. The community did, however, have some attempts at organization to address the needs of the black community, yet they faced limitations. The Negro Citizens Group was on target with the needs of the black community as shown in their requests of the city, calling for more representation in city government and increased black officers on the police force to patrol the black neighborhoods. The city failed to address these needs however turning the requests of the group into a more lopsided struggle to change the plight of the African Americans in the city. The fact that the city overlooked the requests of the NCG paved the way for a group like COBY. Emulating existing Black Power groups such as the Black Panthers, COBY would not make requests initially; action was in order from the outset to solve the problems the community faced. With all of the militancy normally associated with Black Power, COBY would find themselves entrenched in a situation which traversed the simple issue of police brutality.

[56] Roberts Interview.

Chapter 2: COBY Addresses the Needs of Belle Glade

Traditional Black Power Scholarship has focused on groups which preached autonomy for the black community while maintaining a militant appearance. Many of these groups were located in major urban centers in the Northeast, Midwest and West Coast. Black Power has been associated with separatist movements in which African Americans have sought to protect and control their own areas of these cities. One such group is Black Panther Party for Self Defense, which had its start in California as a group which sought to monitor the local police in their own neighborhoods to ensure the safety of the black citizens in those neighborhoods. These police officers often mistreat citizens within the African American communities and the Black Power groups sought to protect the neighborhoods, and eventually moved on to fight for everyday rights such as housing and access to meals. While the movement which included these groups is often presented as a completely separate movement than the Civil Rights Movement, both movements fought for many of the same ‘human rights’ for black citizens. COBY is one such example.[57]

Police Mistreatment

Similar to the Black Panther Party, COBY aimed to protect and take action directly against the mistreatment of the black citizens at the hands of police in Belle Glade. Initially, Roberts and his fellow veterans wanted to confront the Belle Glade Police Department. They conducted reconnaissance of the police department including patrol routes and shift changes.

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[57] Joseph, "The Black Power Movement: A State of the Field," 751-76.

Many in the group wanted to attack the police department head on. Roberts describes some of the members of the groups as "demolition experts bent on destruction."[58] Reasoning with those members, Roberts helped convince those members that an attack on the police department as unnecessary and counterproductive to what the group was trying to accomplish. They saw an opportunity to protect the citizens openly.

COBY devised a plan to address the needs of the community regarding police behavior. They would follow police officers who patrolled the areas of the black community known as the 'quarters,' an area that covered about seventy-eight square blocks of the Belle Glade community where approximately 90% of the black community resided.[59] Roberts and other COBY members would 'patrol' the police routes. While on patrol, the men kept their rifles in the window of their car. While they did nothing illegal by having guns in the car, they felt they had to justify their actions when questioned by the officers they followed. They did so when they referenced the farm owners and other whites in the community, who rode with loaded rifles in gun racks in their trucks. They made sure their rifles were unloaded and that they carried their hunting licenses at all times to make sure that they were compliant with local and state laws. When police investigated a disturbance or occurrence in the community, Roberts and his fellow veterans ensured that the officers were aware of their presence, and their guns. When they felt the officers overstepped their boundaries, specifically when they aggressively handled black citizens, they voiced their displeasure to the police along with other bystanders. The police officers often

[58] Roberts Interview.
[59] Roberts Interview.
John Russ. Personal Interview, 9 March 2012 (subsequently cited as Russ interview).

threatened them only to be rebutted with the statement they were simply watching an officer carry out his duty.[60]

The sight of armed black men in the black community undoubtedly troubled the predominately white police force and the all-white city commission. Imagery of militant groups and the violence that could occur when protecting their community from police brutality was common knowledge broadcasted on national news mere months before. Gun battles with between the Black Panthers and police had taken place California in April and August of 1968, and again in October of 1969.[61] While the success of their presence may be debated, there was a decrease in the amounts of questionable encounters between police and black citizens in Belle Glade during their patrols. However, the militant appearance of COBY would have consequences later. This approach of armed self-defense was beneficial for the time being, but the defining characteristics of the group, including their tactics, were soon to change.

College Activists Join COBY

While COBY worked to address police brutality, word spread that there was a group who was standing up to the Belle Glade Police Department. As a result, their visibility increased in the community and beyond. With the decrease in police violence, COBY became popular among the black citizens of Belle Glade. News of COBY's efforts traveled upstate to the campuses of Florida A& M University and Bethune Cookman College. Students from the Belle Glade area who attended these universities made it a point to meet the group when they returned home after

[60] There is no evidence that conflict resulted from these interactions although the direct confrontation of the officers may have ended in conflict.
[61] "WitnessLA.com » Blog Archive » 41st and Central, 1969 – The Black Panther Shootout & the Birth of SWAT."*WitnessLA.com » Blog Archive » 41st and Central, 1969 – The Black Panther Shootout & the Birth of SWAT*. <http://witnessla.com/lapd/2011/admin/41st-and-central-1969-the-black-panther-shootout-the-birth-of-swat/>.

finishing school. People like Cleo Sears, Ralph Jasper and Marvin Glover all returned to Belle Glade to be activists for their native communities. For them, being involved in activism began in college with groups like the Concerned Citizens of Daytona and other on campus activist organizations.[62] The opportunity to bring home what they learned, and to create actual change for their community, was tremendously appealing to these students.

Unfortunately, these former college students were not met with the same enthusiasm from current COBY members who were hesitant to add them to the fold. The initial members of COBY were military men or parolees, most of whom were wary of students returning to "The Muck" from college.[63] Many of the members were afraid to allow the recent college students into the group because they were perceived as soft. Others were concerned to let them join because they felt the "college boys thought they were better" than the other members of the group.[64] A consensus among many of the members was the students had to be initiated in some way in order to prove their loyalty to the group and the movement. Some suggested the college students taking a particular person into the cane fields and killing them to prove their commitment. Whether out of fear of turning COBY into an outlaw group, or the quick thinking of sharp witted college students, this did not take place. An alternative method of proving their worth to the organization was proposed by those same college students - a newsletter which enlightened the community to the relevant issues as well as the mission of COBY.

During his time as an activist in Daytona Beach while he attended Bethune Cookman College, Cleo Sears came to realize that the goals and tactics of activism had to be made clear to

[62] Sears was involved with the Concerned Citizens group and the Committee for the Defense of the Black Community while in college. Roberts Interview.

[63] The Muck is a nickname given to the area in western Palm Beach County. The cities of Belle Glade, South Bay, Pahokee, and Canal Point are all considered part of the Muck. The Nickname comes from the rich black soil which is found in the area.

[64] Roberts Interview.

the community it served. People had to be made aware of what was happening in the community, what solutions were available, and what action people had to take to help improve the prevailing conditions. Therefore, he began to question how COBY communicated with the people. Sears suggested that COBY create a newsletter. It would be a medium to not only make the citizens of the community aware of occurrences within the community, but give voice to the grievances of the black community because it published the complaints of the black community. According to Roberts, "white people believed it if it was in writing," so the newsletter would allow the community's voices to be heard in the community where they had not been heard before.[65]

Because many of the existing members of COBY could not read or write the suggestion of the newsletter was enough for the original members of COBY to let the 'college boys' into the organization once they got over the initial resentment of towards the more literate former college students. The newsletter, the *Muck Rake*, became popular.[66] No more than a mere photocopied flyer, the *Muck Rake* became a vehicle through which readers came to know the black community had voice for its rights. The Muck Rake carried news of events and ongoing injustices such as housing violations and continued police misconduct, and included challenges to and criticism of the city government because they allowed civil and human rights violations in Belle Glade. At ten cents per copy, to cover the cost of printing the newsletter (although no one was denied a copy even if they lacked the money), the Muck Rake became popular among the black community as well as the white community throughout Belle Glade. While white citizens of Belle Glade were not as apt to come into the black neighborhoods to obtain copies, they would, at times, give a black employee or acquaintance money to get them 20 or 30 copies. It is

[65] Roberts Interview.
[66] Muck Rake, definition: to search for and expose real or alleged corruption, scandal, or the like, especially in politics. *Dictionary.com*. Dictionary.com. <http://dictionary.reference.com/browse/Muck rake>.

unclear of the intentions of retrieving so many copies, whether to ensure access to other black employees or acquaintances or merely to remove the publication from the streets, the Muck Rake was a very big success perhaps due to white liberal interest in the activism of COBY. Needless to say, the COBY ensured that the Muck Rake had plenty of news to publish, as they began a campaign that would raise awareness of the injustices in the community and make the organization visible in the community.[67]

COBY in the Community

COBY quickly became preferred advocate for any local injustices faced by the black community. COBY made it known they would assist in any incident of injustice, whether it was price gouging in the grocery stores or even issues between landlords and tenants. People came to COBY with several issues and COBY responded. Having had success with the police brutality issue, COBY was empowered to continue their activism in the black community.

The black community within the 'quarters' had several options where to obtain groceries. With these numerous options also came some of the injustices faced by black people in the 'quarters'.[68] Many of the black people who came to Belle Glade and lived in the quarters also worked agricultural jobs when crops were in season. When these migrant workers came, many of the grocery stores provided them credit, by keeping records of their purchases on the 'books.'[69] Unfortunately for those who were afforded this credit, some storeowners were very opportunistic in their practices. Many of the local people were unaware of the prices they were being charged

[67] The publication would be referenced in several news reports regarding issues in the city.
[68] Alabama Georgia, Bobby's Market, and Hall's Market are all stores that were in the quarters. All three of the stores are still in operation to this day.
[69] The black migrant workers which patronized the grocers in the quarters spent more time in Belle Glade even though they did travel to other states when farm work was available.

in these stores. While shopping they were subjected to prices at the discretion of the store owners.[70] Several of these stores would not post prices for their items, and adjusted prices subjectively to the benefit of their bottom lines. As Roberts recalls, "Hamburger may be 39 cents a pound in the morning and in the afternoon 69 (cents), whatever they felt."[71] If a customer left town without settling his debt with the storeowner, the storeowner would simply make up his losses by charging more on goods that others bought. COBY not only published these issues in the Muck Rake throughout 1969, they also visited stores daily to monitor the prices of goods and alert potential customers in the black community of the prices and if they changed. The actions of COBY forced store owners to price their goods such that people would be charged fairly. COBY even dealt with health issues concerning these stores. In one particular instance, a store owner would keep his dog behind the meat case. COBY alerted the health department forcing the owner to maintain more sanitary conditions in the stores.[72]

COBY also addressed injustices in some of the tenements within the quarters in 1969 and 1970. In a large number of these residences, many black people in Belle Glade faced exploitation by landlords. Buildings full of one room efficiency apartments, often owned by many of the farm owners for whom the residents worked, existed in the late 60s and early 70s while COBY was present and active. Landlords charged exploitative rent amounts weekly in buildings that were considered slums according to members of the neighborhood. When the tenants failed to pay their rent on time, the owners placed padlocks on their doors the same day the rent was due, leaving families to sleep on the streets or wherever else they could find shelter.[73] COBY became active and dealt with such incidents. They informed many of those that lived in such building of

[70] Russ Interview.
[71] Roberts Interview.
[72] "2 More Members of COBY Arrested," *The Palm Beach Post*, 16 September 1970, p. B3.
[73] Russ Interview.

tenant rights. Many of the victims of this injustice were unaware of the process and let the landlords illegally keep them from their homes. The process of eviction for tenants that could not pay rent was printed in the Muck Rake to inform the black community. The Muck Rake empowered black tenants with knowledge of their rights. COBY also routinely patrolled the black neighborhoods, searching for people who were illegally locked out of their homes, and would remove the locks for the people so they would not have to sleep in the streets. While these actions by white "slumlords" troubled COBY, some members became increasingly troubled that a "profiting blacks" also took advantage of their own community by exploiting black tenants.[74] Helping the black citizens of Belle Glade attain fair housing became one of the calling cards of COBY. Anything people felt was an injustice COBY was involved with, as the city government was soon to discover their effect.

COBY Teams with the FRLS

Between the fall of 1969 and the spring of 1970, COBY solidified its presence in the black community of Belle Glade. Their actions caught the attention of the Florida Rural Legal Services (FRLS). Founded in 1966, the FRLS functioned as a nonprofit which provided legal services for those that could not afford it.[75] The FRLS was comprised of young, inexperienced lawyers, all of whom were intrigued by the activism of the late 60s due to the glamorization of activism on television or because of their actual participation in activism when they were in college. Specializing in low income areas of South Florida, the FRLS also worked closely to ensure the rights of the migrant workers who worked seasonally in many of the fields in Belle

[74] Roberts Interview.
[75] "Florida Rural Legal Services - Free Legal Advice Family Law, Self-help Materials."*Florida Rural Legal Services*. <http://www.frls.org>.

Glade. The FRLS was very active with unions formed for farmworkers and at the sugar refineries in and around Belle Glade including two major strikes which occurred at said refineries.[76]

Many of these young FRLS lawyers were eager to fight for the same civil rights issues that COBY was fighting for. Once they realized how COBY's actions aided the black community in Belle Glade, they began to attend the COBY meetings. Members of the FRLS informed Roberts, who acted as spokesperson of COBY, they were looking for community organizers to address the infractions that citizens faced at the hands of the farm owners and the city government. Roberts countered their suggestion of him being solely a volunteer community organizer by informing them that he needed a job. Appointed as FRLS' Community Organizer, the new job would serve to be beneficial to Roberts, COBY, and the FRLS.[77] Roberts would be employed, COBY would have direct legal counsel, and the lawyers of the FRLS would be connected to the local community through this grassroots movement. By representing cases of civil infractions in the courts, the young lawyers practiced activism within the legal system. COBY parlayed this new relationship with the FRLS to address the embedded injustice within the Belle Glade city government.

COBY and the City Commission

COBY addressed an array of issues for the black community in Belle Glade with the city commission. Their activism covered matters from voting, to redlining, to the rules governing who could run for office to black representation in city government. COBY also brought the issues of police brutality to the attention of the city commission. Attending city commission

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[76] "Cane Cutters Strike," *St. Petersburg Times*, 3 January 1968.
" Sugar Refinery Workers Go On Strike," *Palm Beach Post*, 24 February 1972.
[77] Roberts Interview.

meetings and filing lawsuits against the city became the main avenues through which COBY addressed the city. The FRLS did this by serving as the legal counsel for COBY.

Like many black communities, despite the Voting Rights Act of 1965, black people in Belle Glade faced challenges to voting. The right to vote was an issue that COBY wanted to address. Before situations could improve for people in the black community, they would have to employ the franchise in order to get officials in office who had their best interests in mind. Belle Glade's voting system was set up so a majority of the black citizens would not have a voice in who served in city government. First, the city of Belle Glade had a statute which stated a citizen had to be a resident of Belle Glade for six consecutive months before they were eligible to register as a voter. The main source of income for people in the glades area was farm work, which required working in the fields harvesting crops like beans, corn, celery and sugar, but only during the harvest seasons for those particular crops. Most of the black people in Belle Glade migrated to and from the city several times during the year. Workers would be away for months at a time before returning to Belle Glade. This transition period was enough to disqualify many of the citizens from being able to register to vote. Through cooperation with the State of Florida, and lawsuits against the city filed by the FRLS, COBY and the FRLS pushed the city to change the requirements for voter registration from six months, to one day.[78] With this amendment, almost all of the black citizens, be they migrant workers or year round citizens, were able to register to vote. Once the city changed its voting procedures, subsequently, voter registration drives were held in the areas where many of the black citizens of Belle Glade resided.

Another problem with the existing voting system that COBY challenged, but was less successful with was changing the Election Day from mid-September to mid-March. The existing

[78] Carol Cioe, "Blacks Get Even Chance in Belle Glade Politics," *The Palm Beach Post*, 11 August 1984, p. B1. The issue of voter registration was brought up in the late 1960s but it would not change until 1984.

Election Day occurred when many of the crop seasons in Belle Glade had ended and many workers had already migrated north to find other sources of income. A change in the date of the election would ensure that the black community would be available, en masse, during the elections of city representatives. The efforts of COBY resulted in the registration requirements changing in 1970. The change to the date of the elections was unsuccessful and did not take place until decades later, after the disbandment of COBY.

The ability to even run for office was an issue the black community of Belle Glade faced. Even if there was a person from the black community was willing to run for office and create change from within, the city's policy on land ownership in order to run for office hindered this prospect. The statute stated that only those who owned property in Belle Glade could run for office.[79] COBY knew that the law deterred black citizens from running for city office, so they devised a plan in 1969.[80]

The group found an older woman who owned her home and the land on which it stood. Though illiterate, she aided the group that had been so visible and positive within the community in recent years. The group helped her file to run for office and the seat of city commissioner. Because they did not want to make the existing city commission aware of what they were attempting, they chose to not print their plan in the Muck Rake. Some black citizens thought the group was crazy for what they were trying, stating they would never vote for an older illiterate woman. While their plan to get a black citizen into office ultimately did not go over so well with black voters, COBY successfully brought awareness of the land ownership stipulations to many of the citizens. While not directly related to the election of the first black city commissioner, one

[79] Dean Jones, "Candidates Need Not Own Homes," *The Palm Beach Post*, 19 August 1971, p. D1. The statute was overturned in August of 1971. This issue was initially raised by COBY in 1970.
[80] Roberts Interview.

can argue these efforts raised awareness of the voting needs of the black community more apparent. Even if COBY was not directly involved, their activism related to black voting and the ability to run for office arguably paved the way for the successful election of William Grear.[81] Roberts stated that Grear's election was acceptable to the white people because he did not "rock the boat too much."[82] Nevertheless, Grear would be instrumental in fostering the relationship between COBY and the city from the point of his election moving forward.

Another major political issue COBY wanted to address was the disparity in representation created by the borough system of Belle Glade.[83] This was the same issue that the NCG brought to the city commission years prior. Belle Glade was divided into three distinct boroughs, though each of those boroughs was not equally represented. Two of the city's three boroughs, the North Borough and the Central Borough, were represented by two city commission seats each while the third, the West Borough, was represented by one seat. The problem with this representation was the majority of the black citizens in Belle Glade resided in what was known as the West Borough. Additionally, almost all of Belle Glade's black citizens were housed there, yet borough was represented with only one commission seat. This posed a problem for improving the way of life for black citizens through city government for several reasons. First, if the West Borough was represented by a candidate that was concerned about the pressing issues of the black citizenry, they would have easily been overpowered by the votes of either of the other two boroughs. Secondly, the boroughs which were represented by two commissioners were also the boroughs that controlled a majority of the city's wealth, specifically, business owners, farm owners, city officials and almost all of the city government,

[81] Belle Glade City Commission, 17 October 1969. William 'Bill' Grear is introduced as the first black city commissioner in Belle Glade.
[82] Roberts Interview
[83] "Summary Judgment Sought in Belle Glade Borough Suit," *The Palm Beach Post*, 25 June 1971, p. D3.

therefore the needs of the wealthy few would more often supersede the needs of the less wealthy, including the black citizens of Belle Glade. A third problem created by the borough system, is that it dictated the control of the commission, which in turn controlled the city government and practices and procedures with which the city operated. Since the city commission voted for mayoral candidates, this system created a status quo in which three men, Bill Bailey, John Grady, and George Williams, would literally rotate through the offices of city commissioner and mayor for almost a decade. Doing so ensured the existing systems which benefited most whites, while suppressing a majority of blacks, would remain in place. Resistance to a change in the system became evident once COBY requested the changes. Evidence of this resistance made its way to the media such as the local newspapers.

COBY, in 1970, not only requested changes of the city in regards to voting and black representation in government, but it would ask the city for redress concerning the issues of police mistreatment on behalf of the city's police department.[84] In a complaint to the city commission, one member of COBY notified the city commission that most of the arrests the police made were based on loitering and profanity, additionally people being locked out of their homes by landlords with no other place to go and arrested for sleeping on the streets.[85] The streets would be the only haven for those tenants. Unfortunately this created encounters in which black citizens experienced the abuse. Statutes which set curfews for minors were often enforced in "the quarters." Another popular charge which often resulted in arrests was based on profanity. Many of the profanity charges were at the discretion of the officer on hand.

The issue of police abuse and arrests was so important to the black community that COBY decided to spearhead a march on the city commission. Advertised as the "March for

[84] Belle Glade City Commission, 15 June 1970.
[85] Belle Glade City Commission, 15 June 1970.

Freedom," COBY encouraged members of the black community to join the march to address police mistreatment experienced in the city in June of 1970. Some considered calling the event a "March for Freedom" controversial, so the march would be renamed the "March for Peace" at the behest of the commission's only black member, Grear. Nonetheless, the purpose of the march would not change. Many citizens joined the march on city hall on June 8th of 1970. They crowded the meeting hall and raised such a commotion about the mistreatment experienced at the hands of the police that the mayor and other members of the city commission agreed to have a special meeting to specifically hear the concerns of the group and community at large.

The next week the commission held the meeting for COBY. Many of the complaints that the group had for the commission were in regards to three specific officers: Carrigan, Wrisper, and Jones. All three of the officers, who were black, were assigned to patrol the black neighborhoods. This possibly was a way to address the previous requests of the commission to have black officers to patrol the black neighborhoods, in the same manner that white officers patrolled the white neighborhoods. Carrigan, known as the "Iceman", and Wrisper were named in the four testimonies of citizens presented by COBY. Roberts mentioned that Carrigan and Wrisper were frequent antagonists in many of the encounters of police misconduct. The four people mentioned in the special meeting, recounted events in which the officers arrested and accosted them inappropriately.[86]

Many citizens came forward in the special meeting with specific complaints against the police department. Marion Harris was arrested for waving a pistol by Officer Wrisper and George. The officers claimed she had a pistol but none was found. Dora Moore was arrested when she took her common law husband's hat at a bar. The officer instructed her to go home and when she

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[86] Belle Glade City Commission, 15 June 1970.

refused to comply, the officer talked the husband into pressing charges of assault against Moore. Johnathon Williams stated that he was arrested because the officer said he skipped that line at a show. He stated that he was denied a phone call and access to Commissioner Grear. Arvester Anderson asked Officer Wrisper to stop kicking a 12 year old boy. The next week Anderson was arrested on false charges of profanity.

Several more written testimonies of police misconduct were presented to the city commission, written by people who were afraid to testify in the special meeting. COBY would follow up the testimonies of the citizens with specific requests of the city commission.

COBY Demands of Police:

1) Review board for the police department
2) Enforce laws equally for both white and black communities
3) Stop illegal searches
4) Stop making arrests based on race
5) If both white and black officers patrol the black community then both should patrol the white community
6) Black officers at supervisorial levels
7) Only black police in the black community during the daytime
8) Illegal harassment must be stopped
9) Police should be given an examination to determine latent sadistic tendencies

After the meeting, the city commission took into consideration the demands made by COBY. The response was slow and forced COBY to continue to make demands of the city commission.

Finally, the city commission addressed the concerns of COBY, although not the way the group expected.[87]

Conclusion

For much of 1969 and 1970, COBY embraced the ideals and the image of Black Power; militancy, armed self-defense and protection of the black community. Emulating much of the popular imagery of the Black Power Movement, the appearance of militancy and the politics of autonomy was the calling card of the group early on. However, with the introduction of college students who were former activists at their respective campuses, the tactics and ideology of the group began to shift. Whereas some militant groups such as BAMM and the Florida Black Front who sought autonomy for the black community, COBY sought to influence the system to address the needs of the black community. Fighting for the franchise of many of Belle Glade's formerly neglected citizenry seems to fit more astutely among the annals of the popular Civil Rights Movement. COBY's activism may have begun as more militant community engagement; it came to include cooperation with lawyers of the FRLS and sought change through the legal system, and eventually working within or appealing to the city commission. This shift in tactics while maintaining focus on what was best in their eyes for the black community lends this case study towards blending Civil Rights Movement and the Black Power Movement. Despite some success through these efforts 1969 and 1970, COBY would soon face a great deal of opposition, including actions from the city commission of Belle Glade, and even the federal government.

[87] Belle Glade City Commission, 15 June 1970. All of the testimonies occurred at the special meeting with the city commission. Members of COBY mentioned that there were more citizens who experienced brutality yet did not feel safe coming forward to testify.

The relationship between the city, COBY, and the FRLS would face strains from the existing power system in an attempt to reestablish the status quo.

Chapter 3: COBY Experiences Backlash

As with many historical movements, both the Civil Rights Movement and the Black Power Movement faced opposition. Many of the peaceful marches for civil rights were met with violence from random members of white communities and from local, state, and even federal law enforcement agencies. A common thread in much of the opposition to activism was that much of this resistance came from the existing white power structure. At times the existing power structure was manned by extralegal authority. Some of these people were the farm owners that controlled much of the economy in Belle Glade. Other people included store owners, many times also armed. These people enforced the de facto law of racism who at times physically attacked activists for attempting to create any change in the status quo which oft times overlooked the needs of the black community. Other times the existing power structure included the law enforcement supposedly governed by the de jure law physically attacking those voicing their desire for change.

In the Civil Rights Movement, activists dealt with intimidation tactics and direct violence from predominately white local police and city authorities. Examples include the marches from Selma, Alabama in 1965. Protestors were forced to cancel their initial marches due to the violence from the state troopers and the local county police departments.[88] Images of Birmingham and young people being attacked by police dogs and water hoses from police in riot

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[88] Michael V. Uschan, *The March from Selma to Montgomery*, (Detroit: Lucent, 2011).

gear during a peaceful march is another example.[89] Examples of federal counteraction against events in the Civil Rights Movement include the hearing of the Mississippi Freedom Democratic Party (MFDP) and their spokesperson Fannie Lou Hamer. As an act of direct subterfuge, President Johnson decided to deliver an impromptu press conference during the exact time that Hamer was to speak, televised, to the Democratic National Convention, in order to remove the threat of the MFDP and the awareness that the speech may have raised.[90]

In the Black Power era, local entities, including but not limited to the police departments, tried to counter any actions to gain autonomy for the black community. Efforts to protect the black community by different Black Power groups were commonly twisted by the media as violence directed towards the existing power structure.[91] Little was made of the benefits to the community that these groups made such as the free breakfast programs. These tactics were used to justify the direct action against the groups such as the Black Panthers. Even the federal government took action against such groups. The government surveilled Black Power groups with organizations such as Federal Bureau of Investigation's (FBI) "COINTELPRO" (COunter INTELligence PROgram), which used smear campaigns and propaganda to make claims against the groups such as attempting to overthrow the government.[92] This chapter will examine the different types of resistance and backlash which COBY faced in conjunction with their efforts to improve the lives of the black community in Belle Glade. This opposition came primarily at the hands of the large farm owners, the police departments, the city commission of Belle Glade,

[89] Kim Gilmore, "The Birmingham Children's Crusade of 1963." Bio.com. A&E Networks Television.
[90] Hogan, *Many Minds, One Heart*.
[91] Jeffrey Haas, *The Assassination of Fred Hampton How the FBI and the Chicago Police Murdered a Black Panther,* (Chicago, Ill.: Lawrence Hill /Chicago Review, 2010).
[92] Ward Churchill and Jim Wall. *"Black Liberation Movement." The COINTELPRO Papers: Documents from the FBI's Secret Wars Against Domestic Dissent*, (Boston, MA: South End, 1990).

State and federal agencies, as well as a candidate for one of Florida's U.S. Senate seats, came to oppose COBY in late 1970 and early 1971.

COBY Faces the White Power Structure

Initially, the City of Belle Glade avoided many of the requests made of the city by COBY in 1970. Following "The March for Peace" on city hall by COBY, the city commission allowed the group to voice their concerns in a special meeting in June of 1970.[93] According to subsequent city council meetings, the most the city did in an effort to address the concerns of the citizens and the group COBY was to create a new Bi-racial Committee.[94] Previous attempts at creating a similar committee (Bi-racial Council) to address the racial issues facing Belle Glade in years prior had proven fruitless. The attempt to create a Bi-Racial Committee in 1970 seemed to be an endeavor by the city to placate COBY and their demands. While COBY called for higher accountability and change from the city commission, the response from the city, the Bi-Racial Committee, was to provide a vehicle that was meant to address the problems. This group did not reflect a true image of the issues facing the city, because many of the issues facing the black community and brought forth by COBY to the city were never presented to the city commission by the Bi-Racial Committee. Additionally, this new Bi-racial Committee was supposed to be evenly represented by white and black members even though the racial demographic of city was

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[93] "Glades Racial Climate Cooling Down Following March," *Palm Beach Post-Times*, 10 June 1970, p. C1.

[94] City of Belle Glade, City Commission. Special Meeting, 15 June 1970. The new Bi-Racial Committee served the same purpose that the Bi-Racial Council served in 1964. Yet this council was made up of entirely different people.

a majority black.[95] COBY had been the major force in bringing attention and calling for changes to the issues facing the black community, but only one place on the planned committee was allotted for a member of the group. While there is no explicit evidence that this was subterfuge by the city, one can deduce that the city was more concerned with reestablishing the status quo rather than addressing the issues head on by delegating the responsibility of the racial issues to the Bi-Racial Committee which had no political power and very little influence. The city commission also resisted the demands presented in the special meeting regarding representation on the police force. Regarding the number of black officers on the force, the police chief claimed that many blacks were not qualified to become officers.[96] Overall, many of the concerns voiced by COBY on behalf of the community were met with counterclaims by the commission citing the lack of evidence, need for further investigation, or simple denial that there was a problem. The city commission just refused to act on the requests.

Shortly after the special meeting between the city and COBY in July 1970, direct action to undermine the purpose of the group and any beneficial changes provided to the black community in Belle Glade, commenced. News reports and complaints of illegal surveillance against FRLS and COBY surfaced in the summer of 1970.[97] COBY was being watched both in their office and in the community. Reports of people being photographed began to make the headlines in newspapers. Cars began staking out the headquarters and documenting who came and went in the community. COBY leaders began to be followed as they traversed the black community. There were incidents when police squad cars would stop in front of the COBY

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[95] United States, Census Bureau. "Population Statistics, Florida, Under 25,000" 1970. This number takes into consideration the residents of Belle Glade which traveled to work but spent a majority of the year in Belle Glade.
[96] Belle Glade City Commission, 15 June 1970.
[97] "U.S. Court Gets COBY Claim of Police Ills," *Palm Beach Post*, 8 October 1970, p. D3.

headquarters and take pictures of the office and the people inside. The legal counsel of COBY was not immune to this surveillance either. Steve Johnson of the FRLS had his actions monitored as well at the organization's office and in the community.[98] Local papers published reports of who came and went in and about the FRLS offices and attempted to scare possible allies from working with the organization.

While the surveillance of COBY and FRLS could have been carried out or ordered by stakeholders in the community separate from the city commission and its officials, evidence states otherwise. Much of the surveillance conducted against the groups was done by the Belle Glade police department, using taxpayer dollars. Police Chief Goodlett did not deny this fact when asked directly about the surveillance.[99] Goodlett acted on orders to keep tabs on the group from a higher authority such as the city commission which had become more and more maligned.

Surveillance of COBY and FRLS was not confined to locals, however. Some reports indicate state congressmen were becoming involved with the issues facing Belle Glade. With a major senate election approaching, Belle Glade and its racial issues would be a platform with which to make headway in the polls by some politicians who wished to exploit the situation for their own political gain perhaps to appeal to angry white voters upset by civil rights – similar to other locales through the South. For instance, Republican Bill Cramer, who faced a highly contested election for one of Florida's seats in the US Senate against Lawton Chiles in 1970, was an ardent advocate for the investigation of both COBY and the FRLS.[100] Claims of illegal use of state funded resources to aide a group who directly challenged a municipality of that sate was

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[98] "Observation of COBY Won't End," *Palm Beach Post,* 11 September 1970, p. D2.
[99] Mike Abrams, "Legal Services-COBY Probe Extension Favored," *Palm Beach Post*,10 September 1970, p. D1.
[100] "Cramer Pushes Probe of COBY," *Ocala Star-Banner*, 9 October 1970, p. 12B.

frowned upon by Cramer. He went as far as to challenge the federal director of the Office of Economic Opportunity (OEO) Donald Rumsfeld on the issue of how its funds were used in Belle Glade by the FRLS, a branch of the organization showing that the racial backlash to COBY reached all the way to the federal government when the Florida candidate challenged the allocation of federal funds.[101]

An Attempt to Eliminate the MuckRake

The resistance to COBY was not limited to the lack of response by the city commission to their demands and resistance from state politicians, attacks on the MuckRake, the newsletter used to spread information throughout the community, occurred as well. The MuckRake was COBY's primary means for raising awareness of the issue facing Belle Glade. As previously noted, the publication was used to make citizens aware of the rights they were denied by landlords, store owners, and even the city itself. One could say the MuckRake was the fuel for the fire of activism that COBY has set ablaze in the small farming community. Often depicting the people who were taking advantage of the black community as villainous, it was the main target of many who vehemently opposed COBY. The elimination of the MuckRake would put COBY at severe disadvantage in their community activism.

Bill Cramer made eliminating the MuckRake his number one priority in regards to Belle Glade. When Cramer learned of the MuckRake and the purpose of the newsletter, he immediately pushed for an investigation of the FRLS involvement with the publication. He probably used this as a platform to gain white votes in other areas of the state as well.

[101] "Cramer Pushes Probe of COBY," *Ocala Star-Banner*, 9 October 1970, p. 12B. Cramer questioned the legitimacy of the funding of the group and how the monies were being allocated. His claims were that government funds should not go to an organization which supports a group which undermines a local government.

Meanwhile, he scoffed at the publication's comparison of the police department in Belle Glade to the Ku Klux Klan, which included at times political cartoons depicting white officers lynching black citizens.[102] Cramer stated that he felt that the racial issues that were faced by the city were due in part to this magazine and vowed to push for a probe into its support. Calling it a "kill the cops smear sheet," Cramer took his efforts all the to Rumsfeld's office.[103]

The city commission also sought to end the MuckRake's publication. There were several instances where the publication of the MuckRake was directly addressed in city commission meetings. Often, in city commission meetings when COBY would present issues, the MuckRake was used as a distraction – a way to steer discussion away from the demands of COBY and onto its newsletter.[104] Such questions regarding the publication and funding overshadowed issues COBY felt were pressing and that the commission hoped to avoid addressing.[105] The MuckRake caused such a stir that in 1971, white community leaders from Belle Glade held a private meeting with the neighboring cities of Pahokee and South Bay regarding COBY and specifically the publication.[106] This meeting labeled the MuckRake as "a hostile, seditious, un-American and racist" newspaper. The notes from this meeting also showed the city commission felt the confrontations between the group, landlords and store owners in prior years were due to the founding members of COBY that would set up those confrontations with landlords and the police through the publication. Some went so far as to suggest that the MuckRake was a recruiting tool

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[102] "Cramer Seeks Probe of COBY," *Ocala Star-Banner,* 2 October 1970, p. 2A.
[103] "Cramer Seeks Probe of COBY," *Ocala Star-Banner*, 2 October 1970, p. 2A.
Oddly enough, in much of his campaign against the MuckRake he conveniently was holding a copy of the MuckRake in all pictures. Either he was very careful with his one copy or he obtained many copies, supporting the publication in his crusade against it.
[104] Belle Glade City Commission, 15 June 1970.
[105] Belle Glade City Commission, 15 June 1970. Questions about the muckrake overshadowed the issues at hand
[106] Janie Gould, "Legal Aide: Censure is No Shock," *Palm Beach Post,* 12 May 1971, p. C1.

used by COBY to attract people with criminal records to become involved with the group in order to disrupt significant functions of the city itself.[107]

The surveillance of COBY and Steve Johnson of the FRLS focused on the connection between the group's newsletter and the FRLS office. Speculation from investigators mentioned that materials and equipment used for the FRLS was also used to make the copies of the MuckRake, suggesting misappropriation of funds from a federal entity. These claims fueled the fervor of both city officials and candidate Cramer who argued that funds from the OEO, which sponsored the FRLS, were being used inappropriately given the connection to COBY. Speculation occurred from the frequency of Roberts' presence in the FRLS office, even though he was employed as a community organizer there, and from pictures of Johnson carrying boxes of copies, presumed copies of the MuckRake, from a local print shop.[108] The connection between COBY, FRLS and the MuckRake was so certain in the eyes of the investigation from the OEO that its report suggested that the FRLS jettison a $500 attachment to the copier that allowed for mass printing.[109]

While it was unclear how much support the MuckRake received from the FRLS, Johnson did admit to aiding only the first four editions of the publication. According to news reports, after these editions he no longer used the materials from the FRLS office to assist in making the newsletters, though he did continue to advise and serve as the legal counsel for COBY. Whether this shift was the reason COBY began, or intensified, fundraising efforts or whether methods had been in place all along to offset the cost of printing is unclear. Nevertheless, what is clear is that following the investigation, attempts to silence the publication intensified. The need to fundraise

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[107] Janie Gould, "Mrs. Range 'Recapture Former Relations'," *Palm Beach Post,* 11 February 1971, p. C1.
[108] "Observation of COBY Won't End," *Palm Beach Post,* 11 September 1970, p. D2.
[109] "Observation of COBY Won't End," *Palm Beach Post,* 11 September 1970, p. D2.

would be the key some of COBY's enemies would use to put pressure on the group in attempts to reestablish the status quo in Belle Glade.

Fundraising or Extortion?

Even though the group was fundraising from the beginning by asking for a few cents, they did not deny anyone a copy of the MuckRake because COBY felt people had to be made aware of the community issues. This could be why the first few issues of the Muck Rake were printed on the copy machine at the FRLS. Once it was clear the resources of the FRLS were not allowed for their activism, COBY was forced to raise funds to ensure the Muck Rake would continue publication.

COBY's increased fundraising activities focused on community donations.[110] Accounts vary as to both the amounts requested of business owners and the approach in which the donations were requested, but the request of contributions from local businesses would ultimately lead to the demise of COBY. According to COBY, donations of any amount that store owners saw fit were acceptable. Other accounts, particularly by members of the white community, however, claimed that donations of between thirty and one hundred dollars would be requested.[111] Some of these same community members present during the years COBY was engaged in activism, also mentioned the some members of the groups used the fundraising efforts as an opportunity to profit for themselves. Whether or not people who tried to wrest donations from businesses were actually members of COBY or not is unclear. What is clear is the name of the group was being used in conjunction with threats to the store owners, their facilities, and their merchandise. For instance, a Mr. Wilson, who owned the Alabama Georgia

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[110] Roberts Interview

[111] Mike Abrams, "2 More Members of COBY Arrested," *Palm Beach Post,* 16 September 1970, p. B2.

grocery store, recalled to local news reporters that when COBY came to his store, they asked for one hundred dollars. When he said no, he mentioned that "someone said something would happen" to his meat display case. No charges were filed and Wilson did not even report it to police but he did state that it happened on numerous occasions.[112]

In late August and early September of 1970, some who earlier dismissed the solicitation and did not report the requests for donations to police began to do so. A gas station owner who alleged a member of COBY approached the store and asked for a donation, accompanied by a threat, formally pressed charges. The charges claimed four members of COBY came into the store and told the store owner he must donate one to two hundred dollars to COBY or something bad would happen. The store owner suggested he feared for his daughter's life and that is why he pressed charges. The Belle Glade police department then issued warrants for the four members that were identified from surveillance pictures the police had on file. Ralph Jasper, Cleo Sears, Marvin Glover and Jerry Roberts were all arrested and charged with felony extortion.[113]

The arrests and subsequent court cases kept both COBY and Steve Johnson of the FRLS tied up in litigation throughout the fall of 1970. While the leaders of COBY and their legal counsel, dealt with these criminal charges, activism in the city decreased significantly. Other members of COBY feared similar backlash to the four who had been arrested and seemingly chose to avoid engaging in further activities. Black organizations from other areas, including the Harlem Tenants Association from nearby Clewiston, came to the aide of the COBY members being charged with extortion. Even Marvin Davies, the Florida field officer for the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP), came to Belle Glade to

[112] Bill Schnitt, "'Over and Buried' Trial Past, COBY, Whites Take Stock," *Palm Beach Post,* 26 April 1971, p. D1.
[113] Mike Abrams, "2 More Members of COBY Arrested," *Palm Beach Post,* 16 September 1970, p. B2.

encourage its citizens to continue to be active in advocating for their rights, and to raise support for Roberts, Sears, Glover and Jasper.[114]

Johnson, the lawyer for the arrested COBY members, believed the case was questionable because the city had no real evidence. While it is unknown whether the group actually made statements that could be considered extortion, the accusation was enough for the police department to present a case against COBY. Even after the members were arrested, the gas station owner who pressed charges was not as certain about the events of the alleged threats.[115]

The Beginning of the End of COBY

While COBY had become a staple of the black community in Belle Glade for over a year by 1971 the extortion charges, whether legitimate or not, was exactly what the city, farm owners, and even the state leaders of the OEO, needed to put the pressure on the group. They would be forced to cease their activism and their resources suffocated until the benefits the group brought would no longer be noticed.

With some COBY members facing felony charges, the city refused to address many of the demands the organization had presented previously. Instead the city relied on the work of the Interracial Council (formerly the new Bi-Racial Committee), that had been formed to address the needs of the black community. As mentioned in an earlier chapter, the Interracial Council was similar to the Bi-racial Council that existed in the sixties. The new Interracial Council faced

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114 "NAACP to Investigate Migrant Conditions in Florida," *Palm Beach Post,* 6 August 1970, p. D2. This marked the second time the group advocated in Belle Glade outside of support for the migrant workers on the farms and the Jamaican cane cutters when they were dealing with the sugar refineries. Davies had made an earlier appearance in Belle Glade to address the issues COBY raised, and encouraged the citizens to support the efforts of COBY. When Roberts, Glover, Sears and Jasper were arrested for extortion, Davies again travelled to Belle Glade to raise money for the young men's defense fund.
115 Diane Devine, "COBY Defended, Johnson Says Clients Will Be Exonerated," *The Palm Beach Post,* 19 November 1970, p. F4.

many of the problems that handcuffed the earlier committee. Although half of the council's members were black, several of the black members were better off than most of the black community. One black member was even an owner of one of the tenements that COBY questioned during their aide of the black community. At least one of the other black members was a preacher that had been previously criticized by Davies of the NAACP for not being active in advocating for the needs of the black community. Needless to say, the black members of the interracial committee were not exactly in touch with the true needs of the black community at large, and a far cry from the activist orientation that COBY represented in recent years. Many of them were middle class black members and not a true representation of the black community as a whole.

COBY was also dealt a blow when the FRLS was investigated by the OEO. After the arrest of the COBY members, opponents of the organization turned their attention to the FRLS, the legal life blood of the group. Steve Johnson had been the legal counsel for the group for the year in which it had been so visible within the community. Probes and investigations into the ties between COBY and Johnson of the FRLS were conducted by the police department yet revealed very little to implicate the young lawyer and proved to be fruitless in severing the ties of the FRLS and COBY. Attacks on the leaders of COBY, namely Roberts, also ensued. Interviews with officials of the FRLS produced claims that Roberts used "the Florida Rural Legal Services office as his personal dating service," implying that he either offered jobs to women he was interested in or that he pursued those women who were already employed. The impending trial of the four members of COBY was also a major concern regarding the organization. Roberts was removed from all panels and boards that he was a part of within the city. The removal of Roberts from the Migrant Welfare Board that looked out for the welfare of the migrant workers at the local farms was one that particularly made major headlines. Although Roberts claimed that the board would not look out for the benefit of the people if COBY was not present, the board stated that a seat would be reserved for a COBY member. This seat was never filled though.[116]

In order to ensure that COBY and the FRLS would sever ties, one final blow was dealt. The farm owners applied for and won a grant for the Glades area FRLS. Half of a million dollars would be given to the FRLS in the South Florida area, but only if Steve Johnson be transferred out of the Belle Glade office. Steve Johnson had been the only lawyer that went to the extent that he did to aid in the benefit of the black community. While other lawyers did file suit against the city on behalf of the black community, none had been involved to the extent of Johnson. He was the direct counsel to COBY at all city commission meeting and even helped by serving pro bono to help defend the members of the group against the extortion charges they were facing. While Johnson did his best to assist COBY, the farm owners saw to it that the relationship was over.

Johnson claimed in several interviews with newspapers that the transfer was of his own doing and that he had not been forced out. Yet Roberts claimed that the transfer was a direct act of sabotage against the group that fought for the rights of black people in Belle Glade. Questions were raised but never answered about the suddenness of the move. Other issues surrounding the move included debates on which office Johnson would be reassigned. Initially reports stated that he would be transferred to Immokalee, Florida, a farming community with similar dynamics to Belle Glade. Yet instead, Johnson was transferred to Homestead, more of an urban setting than either Belle Glade or Immokalee.[117]

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[116] "COBY Chief Lashes Out At Politics," *The Palm Beach Post,* 27 November 1970, p. D1.
[117] Mike Abrams, "FRLS Directors Told Johnson Transferring," *Palm Beach Post,* 26 November 1970, p. H2.

Eventually, Roberts, Jasper, Sears and Glover were exonerated of the extortion charges they faced. The jury took very little time to come to the conclusion that the evidence against the young men was inconclusive, if not nonexistent. The damage, however, had already been done to COBY. Members, including the leaders other than Roberts, feared reprieve and therefore became less active in the community. While they were visible when the white high school, Belle Glade High, and the black high school, Lake Shore were desegregated and merged into Glades Central High School, their days of taking on the city against the issues that plagued the black community died down.

Unfortunately, the overall resistance the changes that the group made proved to be too much for COBY to overcome. Memories of the group prevailed, but the visible presence of the organization in the community faded. As mentioned before, some of the efforts they put forth between 1969 and 1971 were revisited later such as the residency requirement for registering to vote. While remnant of the success COBY achieved still exist, the group still could not maintain its fervor.

Conclusion

Roberts retained his activist spirit, however. He eventually wrote a screenplay about COBY's activities that outlined many of the issues which black people not only faced in Belle Glade but all over the country. The film was rejected by many companies before it was picked up by United Artists. Roberts planned to renew activism on a grander scale. He hoped to use the success of the film to promote the issues that he felt needed to be addressed when the company promoted the movie. Unfortunately, the film never materialized. The screenplay never made it to production and the activist spirit which permeated the City of Belle Glade faded. While Roberts remains active in the community to this day, the fight that COBY brought to the city was never the same. Belle Glade

Despite some shortcomings, COBY's activism certainly made a contribution to Belle Glade's black community. The borough system was eventually changed and finally struck down by the state. The housing situations that many citizens faced were improved, even if only slightly. Black presence on the police force in Belle Glade increased. Even former Mayor John Grady used the interactions and improvements that were made in the city and in the race relations in Belle Glade as a small part of his platform in running for President of the United States in the med and late 1970s.

Remnants of the not so distant past still exist in Belle Glade to this day. The economy of Belle Glade is still controlled by the farms and sugar corporations. This means that much of the money that is made by the citizens of Belle Glade is seasonal. As a result many people still live at or near the national poverty line. The buildings which were the focus of much of the activism of COBY still stand. The headquarters of COBY remains vacant and condemned a sullen reminder of a group that was so important to the community and simply could not survive the backlash from the white power structure. A few of the one room tenements still remain in operation today. Some of those tenements still remain in the decrepit conditions that forced COBY to organized for tenant's rights a few actually occupied by residents. Bobby's Market, Hall's Market and Alabama Georgia are still the neighborhood grocers and the only option for many of the residents of downtown, formally known as the quarters.

Belle Glade still occupies the same exact city hall building in which the city commission meetings in which COBY made demands of the commission were held. There are far less entries in city commission meeting minutes that show citizens calling for the rights the black community is being denied today. All these landmarks are time capsules into the past, holding a history of grassroots organizing that paralleled Civil Rights and Black Power Era history.

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