

## Chapter 9

### August 27, 1960—Ax Handle Saturday

*“There is no medicine to cure hatred.”*

—African proverb

Mr. Pearson received several calls on the morning of August 27, 1960 about very suspicious and unsettling activities in Hemming Park. He contacted Arnett Girardeau and Ulysses Beatty and asked them to ride with him downtown to Hemming Park.

“As we approached Hemming Park,” Girardeau recalled, “we saw several white men wearing Confederate uniforms. Other whites walked around Hemming Park carrying ax handles with Confederate battle flags taped to them. A sign taped to a delivery-type van parked at the Duval and Hogan Streets corner of Hemming Park read, ‘Free Ax Handles.’ Small fence rails with shrubbery bordered that section of Hemming Park. [As we drove by,] we could see bundles of ax handles in the shrubbery. . . . No one attempted to conceal them.

“We also saw three police[men] separately riding three-wheel police motorcycles. We watched as the police talked to the men dressed in Confederate uniforms. It appeared they were simply having a conversation. Certainly, [the police] were not questioning [the men]. As we circled Hemming Park, the police left.”

We arrived at the Youth Center the morning of August 27, 1960 unaware of the Hemming Park activities. We opened our meetings with our usual prayer, not expecting this morning to be any different from other mornings. We sang our usual songs, including “We Shall Overcome.” Though our meetings became serious after we started the sit-in demonstrations, this meeting had a more serious bent.

Mr. Pearson explained to us what he, Girardeau, and Beatty saw that morning at Hemming Park. He described the white men wearing Confederate uniforms, and the other white men with Confederate

*It was never about a hot dog and a Coke!*

flags taped to ax handles. He told us about the free ax handles sign and warned, “There could be trouble today.” Mr. Pearson tried to contact Sheriff Dale Carson to express his concerns, but didn’t reach him. Mr. Pearson said he would understand if any Youth Council members decided they did not want to demonstrate that day. We openly discussed our plan of action that day, and whether we would sit in. On the heels of the situation with Parker, we figured we would be facing the Ku Klux Klan in Hemming Park.

Several Youth Council members said we should cancel the day’s demonstration. We tried to stay strong and courageous and move forward. Yet a healthy fear of the unknown played a big role in our conversation.

In a recent sermon my pastor, Reverend Rudolph W. McKissick Jr. defined “healthy fear” as knowing the seriousness of your situation, which is an appropriate characterization of how we felt that day. In that same sermon, he defined determined courage as continuing forward even as healthy fear tries to hold you back.

Sometimes, when you face a situation like that the Youth Council faced that Saturday, you rein in the impetuosity of youth. Sometimes, the situation tests youthful mettle and resolve. Fear on one hand, and our interpretation of courage on the other, played a big part in whether or not we would demonstrate. I cannot really say what won the most points to demonstrate. Appropriately, we made our final decision after Mr. Pearson led us in prayer. We always joined hands and prayed at the beginning and the end of all Youth Council meetings. After the prayer that ended our meetings, we would say, “Together we go up, together we stay up”! Corny sounding perhaps, yet the times dictated we do everything in our power to reassure each other and reconfirm our faith in God.