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# Civil Disobedience, Social Justice, Nationalism & Populism, Violent Demonstrations and Race Relations

## Account of Participation in Sit-ins

by Meg Meneghel MacDonald

**Date:** 1963

**Author:** Huldah (Beth) Taylor

**Genre:** memoir; autobiography; essay

### Summary Overview

Student Beth Taylor's account of her participation in desegregation protests including a "stand-in" demonstration at the local McDonald's and a local cafeteria in 1963 offers a personal memoir of significant civil rights turmoil in Greensboro, North Carolina. Just a few years earlier, in February 1960, four young African American men, all college students, started a national movement when they sat at the whites-only lunch counter at the downtown Greensboro Woolworth five-and-dime-store and politely requested service. When they were denied, they returned every day for a week accompanied by ever-growing numbers of students. Peaceful sit-ins such as these spread across North Carolina and the South in the early 1960s with African American students taking direct action to demand the end of segregation in the South. White women students were part of the sit-in movement from the earliest days, and Beth Taylor's memoir allows the reader to see some of the actions that white supporters took in the movement.

### Defining Moment

A central struggle in the twentieth-century US civil rights movement was the fight to desegregate public spaces such as schools, restaurants and theaters. The college town of Greensboro, North Carolina, played a pivotal role in the 1950s and 1960s. When the Supreme Court ruled that "separate educational facilities are inherently unequal," in the case of *Brown vs. Board of Education* (1954), Greensboro was the first Southern town to announce that it would abide by the Court's decision. However, the integration of public schools and other spaces in Greensboro was slow in coming, setting the stage for further protests in the 1960s.

The sit-in movement of the 1960s took fire in Greensboro and spread across the South. What made the Greensboro sit-in innovative was that it was conceived of and executed by black college students who took direct action to claim their civil rights. This strategy of nonviolent protest was not new in 1960, but it took on a new dimension when conducted by college students. In the first six months of 1960, hundreds of students got involved in sit-ins, occupying the lunch counters of national chains, such as Woolworths, as well as other Greensboro restaurants and theaters.

After a period of relative quiet in 1961 and 1962, many sectors of the Greensboro black population became increasingly critical of the slow progress of integration in education, employment and public life. The spring of 1963 saw increasing protest activity, culminating in May and June with daily sit-ins conducted by thousands of black college students and their white supporters. Moreover, the students were becoming increasingly skilled in their tactics. Two of the major civil rights organizations, the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP) and the Congress of Racial Equality (CORE) had endorsed the sit-in movement from the beginning, and CORE sent organizers to train the students in the tactics of nonviolent protest.

Beth Taylor, a white freshman at the Quaker Guilford College in Greensboro, participated in this tumultuous period of protests in the spring of 1963. The "stand-in" that she describes at the local McDonald's, a restaurant chain so new that she has to describe it in her report, was only one of the protests that she participated in during 1963. This detailed report was written for the Monthly Meeting Newsletter of her hometown Quaker Meeting in Doylestown, Pennsylvania. The general secretary of the meeting, Lawrence Miller, Jr., asked her for the account, noting that he and other members of the community supported and applauded her efforts against desegregation.

### Author Biography

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Born on October 30, 1944 in Doylestown, Pennsylvania, Beth Taylor was just eighteen when she joined the sit-in movement in Greensboro, North Carolina. A member of the Doylestown Friends Meeting, Taylor attended Greensboro College, a well-established Quaker liberal arts school in Greensboro. Historically, members of the Religious Society of Friends (Quakers) embraced and lived the philosophy of nonviolence, serving as conscientious objectors in war. Quakers also were active in reform movements such as women's rights, abolition, and civil rights.

The support that Taylor received from her home community and college professors at Guilford for her protest activities suggest that she grew up and went to college in an environment that supported desegregation and the rights of African American citizens. Her college was one of five colleges in Greensboro—two historically black colleges, two historically white colleges, and Guilford. Quaker student Taylor was the right age at the right place and time to get involved in a student movement.

## Historical Document

I have just received a letter from Larry Miller suggesting that I relay to you the recent happenings in my life. I don't really know quite what to say, but shall first give the details of the incident and then the reactions of this in-name-only Quaker institution.

On Thursday, May 9, Bill Thomas, local chairman of CORE in Greensboro, called to notify me of a stand-in demonstration at McDonald's—a drive-in hamburger place—that Saturday. Two other freshmen and I went in. The turn-out was small because little interest was aroused by the demonstration. Four CORE leaders, negroes, were arrested for refusing to leave the property when asked by the manager in the presence of a police officer. The four were released Monday on bail.

Monday night we went to a CORE meeting. Tuesday Reverend Stanley, minister from A & T College, one of two Greensboro negro colleges, Dick Ransey, AFSC College Secretary from High Point, and two negro students came to speak to Guilford students. As permission to meet on campus would be difficult to get, and not assured, Aldean Pitts had us meet in the Friend's Church. It was announced that night that McDonald's had been desegregated, largely due to the fact that white students, as well as negro, had participated. This was a major victory for CORE and it prompted a very large turnout for the demonstration Wednesday.

Two sophomores went in with the three of us. At the mass meeting preceding the march, Bill Thomas called me aside to ask our special help. Six or so negro students had volunteered for arrest once in the S & W Cafeteria. Negotiations with this and another cafeteria and two theatres have been going on since September, to no avail. The remainder of the students would picket. As we were all white and could easily enter the S & W (The demonstration was expected, and managers and police were guarding the entrance.), we were to distract the manager's attention so that the negroes could enter. We all agreed to do this and left. This was all timed precisely. The remainder of the 1200 students were singing "We Shall Overcome."

We entered the cafeteria and went to the end of the line. I was first and was asked what I would like. I replied that I wanted such-and-such when they served my friends outside. They asked who my friends were. I replied, "The negro demonstrators outside." There were about six pickets. The waitress then told the others in line to go around us. This had not produced the desired effect. We demanded service, and got the Manager. He, being familiar with the procedure involved, asked each of us to leave, and said that he would not serve us. I reminded him that we did not have to do so until each of us was asked individually in the presence of a police officer. The police came, as did TV, movie cameras and newspapermen. We were asked, and realized that refusal would mean arrest. We had asked Bill Thomas about this, but he had only told us that this was completely up to each of us as individuals, and he could not advise us either way.

Four of us, two girls and two boys were arrested. One girl chose to leave. We were taken to the city hall in a police car. There, we were finger-printed, had "mug-shots" taken (I was #58907) and were put in jail cells. We called two people. One was a Mr. Engleman, philosophy and French instructor, who has proved to be of more help than anyone else in our "crusade," and Aldean Pitts. We asked Mr. Pitts only to get in touch with Reverend Stanley. However, he called Pete Moore, who in turn called the President of the College, the dean of students, and dean of college, and came himself to get us out, much to our dismay. We would have preferred not to have been given special attention.

## Glossary

**AFSC:** American Friends Service Committee, a Quaker organization that was active in the civil rights movement

**CORE:** Congress of Racial Equality, a civil rights organization that played an important role in the civil rights movement of the 1960s

**Friend's Church:** Society of Friends (Quaker) meeting house

**negro:** a term used to refer to African Americans

## Document Analysis

This account of Beth Taylor's participation in the Greensboro, North Carolina, sit-ins of 1963 is a rich document that provides insight into the desegregation movement in the South. First, Taylor provides step-by-step details of the strategic organizing that had to happen in order to stage a successful sit-in. Second, the account illustrates how many agencies and individuals worked together to support the student protests. The essay also offers the opportunity to hear from a white woman protestor. Finally, this report is a first person account written for a sympathetic and familiar audience for publication in a church community newsletter, which influences the tone of the writing as well as the subject matter about which she writes.

Writing at the request of the general secretary of the Quaker Meeting to which she belonged in Doylestown, Pennsylvania, Beth Taylor begins this description of her participation in the 1963 Greensboro sit-ins by saying that she would write about the specific actions that took place. She proceeds to tell her story in a chronological sequence, telling the readers how she learned about a minor demonstration at McDonald's on Saturday, May 11. She details the name of the person who contacted her, how many people participated, and the outcome.

Taylor goes on to describe the events leading up to a larger and more successful demonstration the following week. This was a stand-in at the S & W Cafeteria, one of the establishments that had stood firmly against desegregation despite months of picketing and sit-ins. In her account of this demonstration, Taylor provides vibrant and specific information about the unfolding of the demonstration. She writes that approximately 1200 students remained outside singing "We Shall Overcome," the anthem of the civil rights movement, while a few black students and white students entered the cafeteria where they demanded that the black students outside be served. Taylor was one of the white students who entered the restaurant. Ultimately, Beth Taylor and three other students were arrested.

Taylor's story shows how sit-in demonstrations such as these were well-orchestrated events that required the participation of many people as well as precise timing. Among the organizers, she mentions the local Congress on Racial Equality (CORE) chairman, a minister from the local black college, a representative from the American Friends Service Committee (AFSC), and someone who helped arrange for them to meet in a local church facility. She also shows that the demonstration itself involved coordination saying that it was "all timed precisely." Finally, we see that the sequence of events at sit-ins in Greensboro had become somewhat routine. For example, when she and her fellow demonstrators asked to see the manager of the cafeteria, she notes that he was "familiar with the procedure involved."

Finally, because Taylor was writing for a friendly Quaker audience who, she could reasonably assume, shared her values, she allows herself to reveal dissatisfaction with Guilford College and its administrators. She describes Guilford an "in-name-only Quaker institution," but does not elaborate on just how Guilford may have not have been true to Quaker values. No doubt she felt more comfortable criticizing the Quaker institution to other Quakers who may share her criticisms but would also be forgiving of Guilford's faults.

## Essential Themes

The Greensboro sit-ins had a long-term influence on the civil rights movement of the 1960s. For the first time, African American college and even high school students took the lead in desegregation efforts. Their leadership, determination, and commitment drew the support of established civil rights organizations like the NAACP and CORE, and galvanized students like Beth Taylor. The sit-in movement that started in Greensboro in 1960 led to the creation of the influential Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee (SNCC), which played a major role in many of the demonstrations and desegregation activities of the 1960s. Students continued to play an important role in the 1960s protest movement for civil rights and in the later protest against the Vietnam War.

Beth Taylor's account of her participation in two "stand-ins" in 1963 Greensboro illustrates some of the hallmarks of the early student movement: nonviolence and discipline. The principle of nonviolent resistance was one of the central tenets of civil rights leader Martin Luther King, Jr. It was a tactic that was employed by the NAACP as well as the student movement. It was based

on the idea that the peaceful, nonviolent behavior of the protestors would reflect well on the aims of the movement. Violent reactions on the part of the white opposition would reflect badly on them and help to build sympathy for the cause of the desegregationists.

Dr. King's leadership philosophy also emphasized pacifism and Christian moral values. Beth Taylor seems to be criticizing Guilford College for a lack of commitment to Quaker values by saying it is Quaker "in name only." Thus it can be assumed that she shared a commitment to radical notions of human dignity and equality such as those held by Martin Luther King, Jr.

Taylor's disillusionment with her college and what she sees as its lack of commitment to Quaker principles hints at another growing element of the student civil rights movement. As the 1960s drew on, college-aged youth became increasingly critical of the American status quo and the student movement changed accordingly. Finally, the Civil Rights Act of 1964 banned discrimination based on race, color, religion, sex, or national origin, addressed voting rights, and made segregation in public places illegal. The student movement thus moved to other tactics and goals in the later 1960s.

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