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Raising Her Voice: Ruth Perry, Activist and Journalist for the Miami NAACP

by Judith G. Poucher

Ruth Willis Perry sat rigidly in the witness box, clutching her purse and facing the television cameras. Her strained expression reflected not only the tension of a possible jail sentence but also the escalating effects of three years of threats against her life, her reputation, and her career. A few feet away, her would-be assassins smirked and jostled one another. It was February 25, 1957, and Miami's White Citizens' Council had occupied the front rows of the courtroom since early morning. They were ready for a showdown, but so were Ruth Perry and the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP).¹

As an NAACP officer and journalist in the 1950s and 1960s, Ruth Perry's civil rights work spanned the period from the 1953 bus boycott in Baton Rouge, Louisiana, to the 1952 riots at the University of Mississippi. This was also the time when the Florida NAACP—particularly the Miami chapter—was under

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1. John B. McDermott, "10 More Cited in Reds Hunt," *Miami Herald*, 28 February 1958, Ruth Perry Papers at the University of South Florida (USF) Tampa Library, Special Collections; *Dark Legacy*, prod. Darwin Gamble and dir. Chris Thompson, 28 min., WFSU Television, 1994, videocassette; Robert Saunders, (former Florida NAACP field secretary), interview by author, Tampa, Fla., 15 February 2002; Robert Saunders, *Bridging the Gap: Continuing the Florida NAACP Legacy of Harry T. Moore* (Tampa, Fla., 2000), 168.

severe attack by the Johns Committee, an investigative group established by the Florida legislature. Perry was one of the local NAACP officials closely involved in the Miami chapter's fight against the committee as well as other chapter concerns, and she served the organization during some of its most difficult years. As this study will show, Ruth Perry played two roles in the Miami NAACP during the 1950s and into the 1960s: the outspoken activist, who helped the chapter survive and grow, and the developing journalist, who searched for a mature voice while analyzing major events of the civil rights movement for her local audience. Ultimately, she found that voice, and the Miami NAACP found that Perry the activist and Perry the journalist had helped to secure the chapter's future.

Perry's early years prepared her well for civil rights work in the South, for she described herself as "not strictly Northern or Southern in [her] outlook . . . [but] a mixture of two viewpoints." The granddaughter of a slaveholding Confederate officer, who was with Robert E. Lee at Appomattox, Perry grew up in both Ithaca, New York (home of Cornell University), and Williston, South Carolina, a town named for her father's upper middle-class family. She spent her summers in Williston but attended elementary through high school in Ithaca, where schools and churches were integrated. Her father, Francis Marion Willis, was a successful dentist, so Perry grew up surrounded by educated people. Under her father's influence, Perry developed a great love for books and respect for a variety of ideas. Dr. Willis was interested in politics, and the Willises were among the very few Democrats in Republican Ithaca. Perry's childhood experience with divergent viewpoints provided good training for a future activist.²

Perry's later strength of character also emerged from her strong relationship with her father. She admired him, and he

2. Ruth Perry quoted in Robert Saunders, "The NAACP Report," *Pittsburg Courier*, 10 April 1954, Perry Papers; Caroline Perry-Kilburg, interview by author, Daytona Beach, Fla., 31 August 2002; Perry-Kilburg, e-mail to author, 10 September 2005; Ruth Perry, "Along Freedom's Road," *Miami Times*, 19 September 1959, Perry Papers. Unless otherwise noted, columns are from the Perry Papers at the USF Tampa Library, Special Collections, which contains the majority of her columns. The remaining columns were obtained from microfilm or from the private papers of Caroline Perry-Kilburg. Autobiographical notes, speeches, letters, broadcasts, and comments are also from the Perry Papers at the USF Tampa Library, Special Collections, unless otherwise noted.



Ruth Perry at the Miami Beach Public Library, c. 1955. *Photograph courtesy of Caroline Perry-Kilburg*

encouraged her solid work ethic and perseverance. In a letter written shortly after Perry graduated from Drexel University with a degree in library science, and just before she began her first job at Cornell University, Dr. Willis praised her for becoming a

well-educated woman. (She had previously earned a degree in English from Converse College in South Carolina.) He concluded his letter by predicting the moral courage that his daughter would demonstrate in the future, telling her, "later in life you will learn that character is everything."³

Dr. Willis could not have been surprised that his daughter eventually married a soft-spoken, liberal man who admired Eleanor Roosevelt almost as much as Perry herself did. Walter Dean Perry, the son of an Ithaca family, was three years younger than his wife. By all accounts, theirs was a successful marriage, and Perry regarded him as her best friend. Although he did not attend college, Walter Perry was well read. A professional horticulturist, he was also an environmentalist long before the term became popular. In 1940, the Perrys' first and only child, Caroline, was born.⁴

In 1945, Perry and her family moved to Miami, and she began working for the Miami Beach Public Library as a cataloger. In a very short time, she grew to love Florida and could not imagine living anywhere else. She and her husband shared their love of the state as well as their views on politics with their daughter. At Perry's dinner table, serious discussions were a regular occurrence, particularly if they focused on current events or the Miami NAACP. Perry had joined the local branch soon after arriving in the city because she was particularly interested in civil rights. As she later explained to a reporter: "Rather than scatter my effort, I went into the NAACP to do what I could in one area. I feel very strongly that what I am doing (in the NAACP) I am doing for everyone."⁵

The Miami chapter, founded in 1935, was the last chartered in Florida's major cities, because of the difficulty of enrolling white members (all branches were required to be bi-racial) and the continued racist climate of the city in the 1940s and 1950s. Despite Miami's transplanted northerners and tourist economy, the city

3. Perry-Kilburg, interview by author, 31 August 2002; Willard Austen, Cornell University, to Ruth Willis, 13 June 1929; R.H. Edwards, Cornell University, to Ruth Willis, 3 September 1929; Francis Willis to Ruth Willis, 21 July 1929, all from private papers of Caroline Perry-Kilburg.

4. Perry-Kilburg, interview by author, 31 August 2002.

5. "Presentation," *Florida Sun*, 7 December 1951, Perry Papers; Perry, "Along Freedom's Road," *Miami Times*, 18 May 1957; Perry, Speech 7, n.d.; Perry-Kilburg, interview by author, 31 August 2002; Ronald York, "A Witness Eye-View," *Miami Herald*, 1 March 1958.

had, as Perry saw it, “an appearance of more liberality and freedom than actually exist[ed].”⁶

Miami supported an active Ku Klux Klan organization, and the organization’s national Imperial Wizard had retired there in the 1940s. The Klan harassed African Americans who attempted to integrate new subdivisions, burning crosses and homes to intimidate potential homeowners and voters. Beginning in September of 1951, the Klan escalated its activities. A series of dynamite bombings destroyed parts of a newly integrated apartment complex known as Carver Village.⁷ Three months later, and 200 miles north, a bomb exploded under the bedroom of Harry T. Moore, the outspoken state coordinator of the NAACP and his wife on Christmas night, killing them both.⁸

His assassination shocked many Floridians, particularly Perry, who had recently become the Miami NAACP secretary. Perry was “horror stricken that such things were happening in Florida and that killings like this would or could be tolerated by white citizens.” Harry Moore’s death was a turning point for her, galvanizing her into becoming even more active in the NAACP. Determined to help achieve “justice [and] equal rights under the law” for everyone, she soon became a state officer for the Florida NAACP and a regular speaker and radio broadcaster for the Miami chapter. In short, she made the NAACP the focus of her activist energies for nearly twenty years.⁹

6. Caroline Emmons, “Flame of Resistance: The NAACP in Florida, 1910-1960” (Ph.D. diss., Florida State University, 1998), 22, 242. Only fifty members were Required in order to have an NAACP chapter and, twenty-four years after its founding, the Miami chapter’s white membership had reached about 25 percent, although many remained anonymous. See Marvin Dunn, *Black Miami in the Twentieth Century* (Gainesville, Fla., 1997), 220-221.

7. Emmons, 6; Perry, “Along Freedom’s Road,” *Miami Times*, 15 June 1957, Perry Papers; Raymond Mohl, “‘South of the South’?: Jews, Blacks, and the Civil Rights Movement in Miami,” *Journal of American Ethnic History*, 18 (Winter 1999): 5-6; Emmons, 157-158.

8. Ben Green, *Before His Time: The Untold Story of Harry T. Moore, America’s First Civil Rights Martyr*, (New York, 1999) 171,186. For discussion of this violence from an NAACP perspective, see the analysis by Robert Saunders, Moore’s successor, in Saunders, *Bridging the Gap*, 111-119. Saunders, Emmons, Mohl, and Green name the Klan or White Citizens’ Council as the assassins.

9. Perry, “Along Freedom’s Road,” *Miami Times*, 23 December 1961; “Along Freedom’s Road,” 27 October 1956; Perry-Kilburg, interview by author, 31 August 2002; Perry, Autobiographical Notes, n.d.; “Miami Branch Committees,” April-May 1957, Robert and Helen Saunders Papers, at the USF Tampa Library, Special Collections.

Her work for the Miami branch soon drew fire from local racists. In June 1953, Perry began airing her Sunday afternoon radio broadcasts on Miami's African-American station, WMBM. In her NAACP programs, Perry forthrightly called for an end to segregation and full equality for African Americans and denounced Klan violence and other forms of terrorism. Friends in her radio audience questioned such bold statements, asking her, "How have you got the nerve to say such things on the air? Suppose something happens to you?" Perry's response to their concerns was both simple and prophetic. She promised to take sensible precautions and then added: "I believe in some things so strongly that I will stand up for them, no matter what comes."¹⁰

Reprisals for her broadcasts came in a matter of months, first as anonymous phone calls, and later as anonymous letters, which she described to her radio audience as "vilifying and malicious. . . stab-bings in the dark. . . [that proved] that the writer [did] not have moral courage." Segregationists objecting to her broadcasts, often assumed that she was African American, telling her, "Practically everything you Negroes do is an imitation of the white race [because] you haven't been civilized long enough." When one of her detractors wrote, "All you niggers better go back to Africa where you all belong," Perry told her listeners that she could only imagine how much angrier the writer would have been if he had known she was white. (Most of Perry's listeners would have known that she was white, despite her broadcasts being aired on an African-American station, because WMBM's listening audience was relatively small in the early 1950s.)¹¹ She regarded such threats as proof of the effectiveness of the Miami chapter's civil rights work and predicted that more intimidation tactics and threats of violence would follow.

Perry was correct. Bomb threats were called into her home repeatedly during the mid-1950s, but she refused to be bullied. As she bluntly told the Fort Lauderdale chapter at their tenth anniversary celebration, "If you are afraid — afraid of what might happen to you — there is no room for you in the NAACP." When one of her anonymous detractors called her a "half-breed and a crackpot" during her final broadcast in August of 1956, she remained

10. Perry, Speech 12, 5 July 1953.

11. Perry, Comments 4, n.d. (Comments are undated broadcasts.); Anonymous to Perry, 24 August 1954; Perry, Speech 6, December 1955; Perry-Kilburg, interview by author, 31 August 2002.

undaunted and replied that she had no respect for those who wore hoods or refused to provide their names when slandering others.¹²

Perry maintained her poise on the air, secure in the knowledge that she had been instrumental in the growing membership and influence of the Miami chapter. By 1957, as chapter vice-president and state secretary, Perry had watched as the NAACP influence in the Miami area grew until the local branch was holding regular meetings at the Afro-American Life Insurance Company's offices. In addition chapters organized in nearby Homestead, Liberty City, and Perrine worked with the Miami chapter during annual membership drives.¹³

In June 1956, the Miami branch raised its profile by challenging Florida's segregation laws. In a single week, the chapter initiated two lawsuits to integrate the city's buses and schools. The driving force behind both suits was chapter president, Father Theodore Gibson, and chapter attorney, G. E. Graves. Gibson was the African-American rector of Christ Episcopal Church, a powerful congregation of 800 members, and Graves was involved in most of the major civil rights cases originating in Miami. The two men worked closely in several legal actions.¹⁴

The bus case began on June 7, 1956, when the Miami branch demanded an end to segregated buses and announced that the NAACP was considering a boycott. Fully aware of the number of African Americans riding the buses, the economic impact of a two-week-old bus boycott in Tallahassee, and the escalation of the Montgomery, Alabama, boycott, the Miami Transit Company found the threat troubling. However, the Miami chapter eventually decided not to follow through with the boycott in order to avoid violence.¹⁵ As the local NAACP chapter grappled with their

12. Perry, Speech 6, December 1955; Caroline Perry-Kilburg, interview by author, Daytona Beach, Fla., 29 July 2002; Perry-Kilburg, interview by author, 31 August 2002; Speech 9, 22 November 1955; Broadcast 2, 22 August 1956.

13. Perry, "Autobiographical Notes," n.d.; State Archives of Florida, Tallahassee, Fla., Florida Legislative Investigation Committee (subsequently referred to in footnotes as FLIC) Records, RG 940, box 13, "Names Lists," file 11, "Miscellaneous," 5 June 1956; Perry, "Along Freedom's Road," *Miami Times*, 17 November 1956; Comments 2, February 1956.

14. Emmons, 218-219; Saunders, *Bridging the Gap*, 83; Dunn, 182, 191.

15. Dunn, 213; Perry, "Along Freedom's Road," *Miami Times*, 12 January 1957. Emmons (223) differs with Perry's eyewitness account on this point, while Glenda Rabby's interpretation is similar to Perry's. See Glenda Alice Rabby, *The Pain and the Promise: the Struggle for Civil Rights in Tallahassee, Florida*, (Athens, Ga., 1999) 51.



Marvin Davis, State Field Director, NAACP with Reverend Theodore Gibson, former President of the Miami Branch, 1968. *Photo courtesy of the Historical Museum of South Florida*

options, Perry corresponded with Thurgood Marshall, Chief Counsel and Director of the national NAACP's Legal Defense and Educational Fund. Advised that the final decision lay with the chapter, Gibson, Perry, the other officers, and Graves filed suit. Six months later, when the U.S. district court ruled in favor of the NAACP, Perry was in the courtroom. In her assessment of the ruling, Perry noted that desegregation of Miami's buses could be accomplished non-violently if city officials enforced the law; she emphasized that the NAACP's opposition to violence had prevented a Miami bus boycott. With a local victory in the bus suit, the Miami chapter grew even stronger. As Florida's NAACP field secretary, Robert Saunders, saw it in 1957, the Miami branch had almost 100 percent backing from local African Americans for the first time in the chapter's history.¹⁶

16. Marshall to Perry, 17 July 1956; Perry, "Along Freedom's Road," *Miami Times*, 12 January 1957; Perry, Speech 5, n.d.; Saunders, *Bridging the Gap*, 83; Perry, "Along Freedom's Road," *Miami Times*, 12 January 1957; Emmons, 229. In 1958, the Miami branch won again in federal appeals court. This victory left the city only one recourse, an appeal to the US Supreme Court which Miami's

The chapter's school suit paralleled the bus case. In response to Florida's delay in implementing the 1954 *Brown v. the Board of Education* decision, Miami NAACP president Gibson and five other parents filed a federal suit on behalf of their children in June 1956 to end segregation in Dade County. Perry characterized the suit as the "real birth of freedom for all of us here in Florida."¹⁷ As he had with the bus suit, Thurgood Marshall corresponded with Perry on the school case. However, while his advice on the latter dealt primarily with attorney fees, Perry's work on the case focused on publicity and fundraising. As with the bus suit, Perry spoke to other NAACP chapters about the school case, urging members to support the action not only through the NAACP, but also through their churches and clubs. She was characteristically blunt in her appeals: "Our goal is this—to write off the word 'segregation' from Florida law. . . . If we want freedom, we can raise enough money here today or within a few days. Don't tell me you can't afford it."¹⁸

With two high-profile cases working their way through the courts, the Miami chapter became one of the most aggressive branches in the Florida NAACP by the mid-1950s. By the mid-1950s, the chapter provided much of the leadership for the state organization as well. At the state conference in October of 1956, all but one of the state officers for the coming year were from Miami, including Gibson and Perry, who were re-elected as treasurer and secretary.¹⁹

In the fall of 1956, Perry took on a new assignment for the NAACP. She began writing a weekly column for the *Miami Times*, one of the oldest African-American newspapers in Florida. Her column, "Along Freedom's Road," provided a new forum for Perry and other Miami chapter officers, allowing them to reach a larger audience and leave a more lasting impression. More forthright than her broadcasts, Perry's columns exposed racism by analyzing current events from an NAACP perspective, often quoting other NAACP officials and never hesitating to name racist organizations and politicians, whether local, state, or national.²⁰

city attorney said would not be successful (Perry, "Along Freedom's Road," *Miami Times*, 19 April 1958).

17. Perry, Speech 5, n.d.

18. Thurgood Marshall to Perry, 17 July 1956; Perry, Speech 5, n.d.

19. Perry, "Along Freedom's Road," *Miami Times*, 13 November 1956.

20. Perry, "Along Freedom's Road," *Miami Times*, 6 October 1956.

Such defiant views coming from an increasingly visible NAACP activist made Perry a more inviting target than she had been as a broadcaster and also caught the attention of the state legislature's newly formed investigative group, the Johns Committee. Officially known as the Florida Legislative Investigation Committee, this panel was the brainchild of state senator and former Acting Governor Charley Johns. Born out of the integration hysteria that pervaded Florida during the Cold War and after the *Brown I* and *II* decisions began to generate integration suits, the committee was designed to investigate integrationists and subversives. Its communist strategy became apparent at its second meeting when the committee reviewed the U.S. House Un-American Activities Committee's rules of procedure. The Johns Committee planned to portray the NAACP as communist-influenced by obtaining the organization's membership lists and meeting minutes. These records could then be matched against the committee's lists of communists. That their own lists were inaccurate was irrelevant to the committee; if they could portray NAACP members as communists, it was but a short leap to show that the organization's push for integration was really a communist plot. Thus the Miami chapter's records were the linchpin of the Committee's McCarthy-like strategy.²¹ As Miami chapter secretary and guardian of those membership rolls and meeting minutes for the past seven years, Ruth Perry's most dramatic service to the chapter came in protecting those records. In order to obtain the membership lists, the Johns Committee subpoenaed Perry and other chapter officers to testify in a public hearing held on February 25, 1957.²²

²¹ FLIC Records, RG 940, box 1, "Administrative Files", file 16, "Minutes", 11 September 1956. For a detailed discussion of the Committee's legal strategy, see Steven F. Lawson, "The Florida Legislative Investigation Committee and the Constitutional Readjustment of Race Relations, 1956-1963," in *An Uncertain Tradition: Constitutionalism and the History of the South*, eds. Kermit L. Hall and James W. Ely, Sr. (Athens, Ga., 1989), 300-302. *Dark Legacy*, video-cassette; FLIC Records, RG 940, box 1, file 16, "Minutes," 10 October 1956. For more on the Committee's origins and strategies before the 1957 Miami hearings, see Judith Poucher, "One Woman's Courage: Ruth Perry and the Johns Committee," in *Making Waves: Female Activists in Florida*, eds. Jack E. Davis and Kari Frederickson. (Gainesville, Fla., 2003), 229-249.

²² Florida law limits disclosure of the "identity of any witness, any person who was a subject of inquiry, or any person referred to in testimony, documents, or evidence retained in the committee's records; however this exemption does not apply to a member of the committee, its staff, or any public official, who was not a subject of the inquiry" See Florida Statutes, *Legislative*

Only two days before she was scheduled to testify, Perry learned from chapter attorney Graves that she had been “marked for assassination.” He uncovered the Miami White Citizens’ Council plot to start race riots through a series of actions that would begin with a cross burning, followed by bombings at two housing projects, and ending with five gunmen shooting Perry, Graves, Gibson, and two other NAACP officials. Acting on information supplied by his paid informant, Graves, the police, and the media were waiting for the terrorists when they planted the cross.²³ Less than two days later and, despite a legitimate concern for her own life, Perry took the stand, knowing how crucial her testimony would be. As the official guardian of the chapter’s records for seven years, she not only controlled the files, but had a detailed understanding of their contents and knew much information from memory alone. The future of the Florida NAACP hung on Perry’s testimony. As Gibson insisted years later, “If members’ names had been exposed . . . the NAACP would have been able to hold roll call in a telephone booth.”²⁴

As Perry testified, she faced not only the television cameras but also her would-be assassins, the men of the White Citizens’ Council, as they sat only a few feet away from her on the front rows of the courtroom. Leering and elbowing one another, they waited eagerly for her to break. She disappointed them. Despite intense questioning by the Johns Committee, Perry never flinched. She not only refused to cooperate; she also helped to outsmart the committee. Acting upon Chief Counsel Thurgood Marshall’s orders, she and Graves had shipped all chapter records to New York before the hearings began.²⁵ On her *own* initiative, she had

Organization, Procedures, and Staffing (1993, chapter 11, section 11.0431 (1) (g)). In order to protect the people who were victimized by the Johns Committee investigations, this study contains only names already in sources other than Johns Committee documents. Other than those connected with the Virgil Hawkins case against the University of Florida, Miami chapter officers and leaders were subpoenaed more than any other branch in Florida in 1957 (FLIC Records, Box 13, file 12, “Miscellaneous”).

23. Perry, “Autobiographical Notes,” n.d.; “The Daring Plot against Miami Negroes,” *Jet*, 28 March 1957, Perry Papers; Dunn, 210; Saunders, interview by author, Tallahassee, Fla., 18 December 1998.
24. FLIC Records, RG 940, box 4, “25 February 1957 Miami Transcripts” file; Jack Mann, “Gibson Breaks Witch Hunt by Charley Johns,” *Miami Herald*, 5 December 1968, Perry Papers.
25. Saunders, *Bridging the Gap*, 168; Saunders, interview by author, 15 February 2002.

Tallahassee, Perry testified as a witness. She informed her readers which NAACP members were present and described the unprofessional manner in which the hearing was conducted.³⁷

In 1963, Perry saw her pride and courage justified when, in *Gibson v. The Florida Legislative Investigation Committee*, the U.S. Supreme Court ruled in favor of Gibson and the NAACP. That ruling not only prevented the Johns Committee from obtaining Florida NAACP records but ensured the survival of the organization within the state. In Miami, the Gibson case helped to increase membership as well. Once people knew that NAACP officers would go to jail to protect the membership lists, new members joined the organization.³⁸ Just as Perry had promised her readers, the Miami NAACP had prevailed.

Ruth Perry helped the chapter prevail by fulfilling her role as an officer responsible for much of the practical work of the chapter. Acting as its spokesperson, she publicized its lawsuits and reported its courageous stands and victories against the Johns Committee. However, Perry's second role in chapter affairs was concerned less with her position as the voice of the chapter and more with finding her own voice as a civil rights journalist. Perry reported on some of the major events of the civil rights movement—from the *Brown* decision in 1954 to the University of Mississippi riots in 1962. In commenting on these events, Perry matured as a journalist as she transcended the workman-like tone of her other broadcasts and columns on local chapter activities. In reporting on the *Brown* decision or the riots in Mississippi, she analyzed national events in which she had not participated, unlike the chapter's lawsuits or the Johns Committee hearings. However, although her analysis changed, Perry continued to write for a local audience, the same group for which she intermittently composed her utilitarian journalism. Thus, writing on a level beyond the informational and the personal—while analyzing national events—initiated her search for a different voice.

Only a few months after she began her NAACP broadcasts, Perry reported her first major civil rights event, the U.S. Supreme

study of associational privacy. Saunders, interview by author, 18 December 1998; Perry, "Autobiographical Notes," n.d.

37. Perry, "Along Freedom's Road," *Miami Times*, 4 June 1960.

38. Perry, "Along Freedom's Road," *Miami Times*, 6 April 1963, Perry-Kilburg Papers; 23 March 1963; 6 April 1961; Lawson, "Florida and Race Relations," 315–316; Dunn, 222.

Court's 1954 *Brown* decision declaring public school segregation unconstitutional. She compensated for her lack of experience in covering national events by using the informational voice of her earlier broadcasts and drawing upon her years as a librarian. In her columns on *Brown*, Perry spoke primarily as the consummate librarian—a finder and conveyor of facts. More detailed than her broadcasts on chapter news, the voice of the librarian is evident in her coverage of *Brown*. In her first radio broadcast on the pending *Brown* decision, Perry spoke to the audience's intellect as she explained not only the complicated evolution of the case but the particulars of the NAACP's legal approach. In a follow-up broadcast only a month before the ruling, Perry's tone, while still informational, was also interpretive. First, she reported the remarks of Florida's state superintendent of schools—that a Florida case, and possibly a case for each of the states, would have to be heard by the court before its decision could apply to Florida. Then with the precision of a librarian and the perception of an intellectual, Perry interpreted his remarks with cool but damning logic: "if the decision ... is to end school segregation in those states [in which the suits began], the spirit of the law will also apply in every other state. That is my interpretation [and] that of the NAACP."³⁹

In her next broadcast after the May 17 announcement of the *Brown* decision, Perry's tone remained informational; however, she also placed the ruling within a larger civil rights context by tracing the numerous legal precedents for *Brown*. Placing the *Brown* announcement within the larger context of the legal precedents and Constitutional rights that drove the civil rights movement allowed Perry to write with a greater sense of optimism, while also appealing to her listeners' own sense of historical progress.⁴⁰

Three months later, Perry analyzed *Brown* against the backdrop of international relations and the Cold War. After tracing the growth of white supremacy from the post-Reconstruction period to the present, Perry alluded to the status of the United States as a world power in the Cold War: "What we do here in Miami will sooner or later have its effect on Washington or London or a little town in Indochina." In one statement using simple logic, Perry

39. Perry, 25 October 1953 Broadcast, Perry-Kilburg Papers; 11 April 1954 Broadcast, Perry-Kilburg Papers.

40. Perry, 23 May 1954 Broadcast.

internationalized the local issues of white supremacy and civil rights. While she appealed to her audience's historical and global understanding, she spoke to the immediacy of their civil rights struggles in Miami as well.⁴¹

Perry localized civil rights in a new way in October 1954. She asked daughter Caroline and three other teens to participate in a special broadcast on integration in Miami. Caroline, a student at Miami Beach High School, was joined by a friend and classmate, as well as two African-American students from Miami's segregated high schools. Perry acted as moderator, asking questions on such practical issues as the grade level at which integration should begin and how adults could prepare for school integration. She allowed each student to answer in turn. Perry's daughter maintained that parents delayed integration by teaching their children prejudice. After the Supreme Court's ruling on the implementation of *Brown* in 1955 (commonly referred to as *Brown II*), Perry made periodic progress reports on the effects of the ruling and the status of school integration. In her last reports, she echoed her daughter's view—and unknowingly predicted a national crisis by saying that the “largest part of the adjustment [to school integration would] have to be made not by children, but by their *elders* [emphasis added].”⁴²

A few days later, her words came true in a way that must have sickened her. As law enforcement officials watched, a screaming white mob, composed mostly of adults, tried to stop nine African-American children from entering Little Rock's Central High School.⁴³ In a matter of hours, the students, known as the Little Rock Nine, and the Arkansas city in which they lived became the crucible of American democracy, and a turning point in the life of Perry. The calm, intellectual voice that had characterized her radio broadcasts on the *Brown* decisions proved inadequate to convey her emotions in the Little Rock crisis. Her weekly NAACP column, “Along Freedom's Road,” reflected the challenges she had faced in the time between *Brown* and Little Rock—personal

41. Perry, 22 August 1954 Broadcast.

42. Perry, 10 October 1954 Broadcast; “Along Freedom's Road,” *Miami Times*, 7 September 1957.

43. Relman Morin, “Violence at Central High,” in *Reporting Civil Rights*, (New York, 2003), 373-377; James L. Hicks, “We Were Kicked, Beaten,” in *Reporting Civil Rights*, 378-381; Melba Patillo Bealls, *Warriors Don't Cry: A Searing Memoir of the Battle to Integrate Little Rock's Central High*, (New York, 1994), 112-114.

threats, a Johns Committee hearing, an assassination plot, and an attempt at economic reprisal. She also had confronted the real possibility of a jail sentence when she refused to relinquish the NAACP records. Furthermore, integrated education increasingly became less theoretical for Perry since her only child was the same age as three of the Little Rock Nine students.⁴⁴

Perry's first column on the violence at Little Rock was the most passionate of her career. In her September 14, 1957 column, one emotion dominated: pure outrage. Perry made her indignation clear from the outset, saying that Governor Orval Faubus had created "one of the most disgraceful incidents in recent American history" when he refused to obey a court order to desegregate and called out the Arkansas National Guard to enforce his defiance. Clearly, hers was no longer the voice of the dispassionate librarian merely conveying information. She now appealed to her readers' emotions more than to their intellect and to their sense of justice more than their sense of reason. Halfway through the same column, her anger evolved into a sarcastic tone as she discussed states' rights. Claiming that most people believe each state to be one portion of the whole union of states, Perry launched another salvo at Faubus: "This fact isn't clear to Governor Faubus apparently." Never had she been so direct in her criticism of one person. However, with the exception of Charley Johns, no one had ever infuriated her more than Faubus.⁴⁵

The Little Rock crisis itself must have been sickeningly familiar to Perry: it echoed the Klan violence that killed Harry Moore and the abuse of power that characterized Charley Johns' reign of terror. Ultimately, the core of her outrage toward Faubus lay in one simple fact: in disobeying a U.S. district court order to desegregate, he had defied the legitimacy of the federal government and thus the cornerstone of American law, the Constitution.

Perry's respect for the Constitution was no mere lip service. She had joined the NAACP because, as she told a fellow-reporter, she was "interested in the Constitutional rights of everyone."⁴⁶ She

44. FLIC records, RG 940, box 4, "25 February 1957 Miami Transcripts" file.

45. Perry, "Along Freedom's Road," *Miami Times*, 14 September 1957; Caroline Perry-Kilburg, interview by author, 31 August 2002. Perry's criticisms of Johns became more direct and frequent after the 1958 Johns Committee hearings.

46. Perry, "Along Freedom's Road," *Miami Times*, 14 September 1957; York, "A Witness," Perry Papers; Perry, "Preliminary Statement," 26 February 1958, Perry Papers.

had risked her life and her freedom during the Johns Committee's witch-hunts because of her belief in the Constitution, particularly the Fourteenth Amendment's guarantee of due process and freedom of association. The same amendment was central to her defense (as well as that of her fellow-NAACP officers) in the Johns Committee hearings. Even in the midst of her outrage, her emotions sprang from an intellectual base: the Constitution and her respect for it as the law of the land.

Two weeks after her initial column on Little Rock, Perry's criticisms of Faubus remained highly charged, but she attempted to return to her intellectual voice by placing the governor's actions within the context of the Cold War. She reported an incident at the United Nations: after a dark-skinned Ceylonese representative condemned the Soviet Union's aggression in Hungary, he was told by the Bulgarian delegate, "Something worse could happen to you if you go to Little Rock." By the time Perry was writing her next column, federal troops were in Little Rock, and her voice of outrage returned in full force. She lambasted Faubus again, saying that the crisis was "brought about by ... a demagogue" who had defied federal authority set forth in the Constitution.⁴⁷ Almost a year later, even after the circuit court of appeals ordered integration in Little Rock to proceed, Perry's indignant voice persisted. Describing segregation as a "festering sore on the body politic of America," she implied that she felt the same way about Faubus, whom she compared to the Roman emperor Nero.⁴⁸ Clearly an appeal to emotions over intellect dominated these columns.

By the summer of 1959, as progress became more apparent in Little Rock, Perry offered a more analytical response to the crisis. With the advantage of hindsight, she noted that the battle over Little Rock and the eventual victory of law and order over demagoguery proved that the "U.S. Constitution is more than a document—it is the embodiment of our democratic way of life." By setting the crisis within its Constitutional context, Perry appealed to her readers' respect for the law and their sense of reason, thus counterbalancing the irate voice of her previous columns. However, Perry's anger at Faubus himself never dissipated. Even after the court had ordered integration to begin in Little Rock, she

47. Perry, "Along Freedom's Road," *Miami Times*, 28 September 1957; 5 October 1957.

48. *Ibid.*, 6 September 1958.

maintained that he was the best example of “undisciplined, selfish demagoguery [that she had] ever seen.” In her last salvo at Faubus, she described him as a “purveyor of hate and prejudice” and compared him to Adolf Hitler.⁴⁹

In her columns on the Freedom Rides, the next civil rights event that she covered, Perry found some balance between intellect and emotion. In a dual-topic column, Perry’s last words on Little Rock were also her first column on the Freedom Riders, interracial groups of travelers who challenged segregation on interstate buses. In May of 1961, after the Freedom Riders had been attacked by the Klan in Anniston, Alabama, as well as Birmingham and Montgomery, Attorney General Robert Kennedy dispatched 600 U.S. marshals to Montgomery; Governor John Patterson responded by calling out the Alabama National Guard. Perry, admitting that such news made her angry, praised Kennedy’s decision to send marshals rather than troops, saying, “We all remember the bitterness engendered in Little Rock by the arrival of such troops.” She described Patterson as another state official who tried to “defy, nullify, and fight the US government” and incited violence with his inflammatory speeches. Less outraged than in her columns on Faubus and Little Rock, she described the situation in Patterson’s state and his actions rather than his character or personality. Unlike her characterizations of Faubus, Perry never referred to Patterson as a demagogue or compared him to such despots as Nero or Hitler.⁵⁰

By 1961 Perry’s life had also become less stressful. She had survived two additional Johns Committee inquisitions and the threat of a jail sentence when she was cited for contempt by the Committee for refusing to relinquish chapter records. However, the numerous threats (both economic and physical), the assassination attempt, and the earlier hearing were in the past. She also celebrated the progress of the NAACP’s case against the Johns Committee. Just a few days before the first Freedom Riders were attacked in Anniston, chapter president Gibson was granted a hearing by the U.S. Supreme Court. Such success would certainly have affected the tone of Perry’s columns on the Freedom Rides.

49. *Ibid.*, 13 June 1959; 6 September 1958; 20 August 1960.

50. *Ibid.*, 27 May 1961.

51. FLIC Records, RG 940, box 4, “27 February 1958 Miami Transcripts” file; “RR Depots Hit by NAACP,” *Miami Herald*, 2 June 1961, Perry Papers.

In addition, the Miami chapter responded proactively to the crisis in Alabama by surveying South Florida's bus and rail depots. After finding that most of the depots remained segregated, chapter attorney Graves told reporters that the NAACP was considering submitting a report to the Interstate Commerce Commission (ICC).⁵¹ As the survey results began to be reported by the local press, Perry's coverage of the Freedom Rides took on a tone less like her Little Rock columns and more like her *Brown* broadcasts and columns. In approaching a balance between emotion and intellect, she began to find her mature voice as a journalist.

In her June 3, 1961 column, Perry did not cite the Miami chapter's survey results directly, but she provided background information about new ICC regulations on integrated travel. In the remainder of the column, her analysis became more sophisticated as she focused on the Freedom Rides. After noting that national columnists and broadcasters were divided on the issue of the Freedom Rides, Perry defended direct action campaigns for a segment of the American population that had been denied their rights for so long. She concluded in a cerebral tone, saying that the "aims [of the Freedom Riders were] American and just. . . [and that it was] not democratic forces that [were] holding them back but prejudiced and intolerant people."⁵² Perry appealed to her audience's intellect and respect for the law and set the Freedom Riders' struggle within the context of the rights guaranteed to all citizens by the Constitution, a theme from her previous broadcasts and columns.

Six months later, when violence against the Freedom Riders erupted again, this time in McComb, Mississippi, Perry's voice of indignation returned briefly. In a sarcastic tone, she first asserted that Mississippi apparently viewed itself as part of the Confederacy and not the Union. Returning to her use of Cold War rhetoric, she warned that the negative international publicity from the racial violence against the Freedom Riders could be far-reaching.⁵³

In January of 1962, with the advantage of hindsight, Perry wrote her last column on the Freedom Rides, focusing on one participant, the Reverend William Sloane Coffin, Jr. Because he was neither a well-known civil rights leader nor an elected official, Coffin was in many ways an average person who acted on the courage of his convictions (much like Perry herself). The nephew

52. Perry, "Along Freedom's Road," *Miami Times*, 3 June 1961.

53. *Ibid.*, 9 December 1961.

of the theologian Henry Sloane Coffin, as well as the Yale University chaplain, Coffin was one of a group of white professors and African-American students who, as Freedom Riders, were jailed in Montgomery. Perry saw his participation in the Freedom Rides from primarily a philosophical perspective. Emphasizing the Freedom Rides as acts of civic conscience, she explained that Coffin believed that one could not be "an American and good Christian without doing something about discrimination" and segregation.⁵⁴

Portraying Coffin as a Christian activist allowed Perry not only to appeal to her readers' religious backgrounds but also to balance some of the moral outrage and emotional power of her Little Rock columns with her more philosophical analysis of the Freedom Rides. In featuring Coffin, she was showing her audience what a Freedom Rider was as much as telling them, for the whole lesson of Coffin's example was that his actions matched his beliefs. Although she had noted Governor Patterson's irresponsible actions more than his personality, she now emphasized Coffin's activism in order to reveal his character. In writing about his character only in terms of his deeds, Perry also achieved a more dispassionate, analytical voice, which furthered her growth as a journalist.

After late 1961 Perry's columns appeared less frequently because of her increasing professional responsibilities and travel.⁵⁵ In her continually evolving style, Perry spoke with irritation, not anger. She transcended her outrage over Little Rock and her intermittent sarcasm in reporting on the Freedom Rides, and her last nine columns on civil rights events focused on Governor Ross Barnett and/or the University of Mississippi riots. In the fall of 1961, a reporter asked Barnett if he planned to observe United Nations Day in Mississippi. The governor responded that he would not observe any day that honored an organization run by Africans. In her column on the incident, Perry showed her readers Barnett's racism and anticipated the crisis that would soon overwhelm the state. At the same time she gave her readers another positive portrait by featuring a leader from one of

54. Ibid., 27 January 1962. Coffin, from a wealthy New York family and married to the daughter of famous pianist, Arthur Rubenstein, was also involved later in demonstrations at the Sixteenth Street Baptist Church in Birmingham. He was inspired to become a Freedom Rider after seeing a news photo of John Lewis bleeding as he lay in a Montgomery street (Diane McWhorter, *Carry Me Home: Birmingham, Alabama—the Climactic Battle of the Civil Rights Revolution* (New York, 2001), 239, 404, and 411).

55. Perry, "Along Freedom's Road," *Miami Times*, 7 July 1962; 1 September 1962.

the African nations that Barnett had maligned: John Luthuli, the 1960 Nobel Peace Prize winner from South Africa. Presenting Luthuli as one who had long been able to see beyond his own provincial concerns, she ended her column with a tone of tolerance, saying that she hoped that someday Barnett would "see beyond the confines of the state of Mississippi."⁵⁶

A year later, Perry's hopes for progress in Mississippi were crushed when Barnett and school officials denied James Meredith's admission to the University of Mississippi in defiance of court orders. Although Barnett defied the law of the land much as Faubus and Patterson had done, Perry chose to respond differently. Rather than drawing another tempting parallel, as she had with Little Rock and the Freedom Rides, Perry avoided all comparisons. She also made no references to dictators or despots as she had with Faubus. Writing after the riots ended at the university, Perry spoke with an emotional distance and maturity that her Little Rock columns had lacked. She had expended the last of her sarcasm in her columns on the Freedom Riders and now turned to irony as she spoke of Mississippi's future: "Someday Mississippi will join the Union." However, her chief concern over Barnett and the riots centered on the importance of the Constitution. For her, Meredith's fight to attend the University of Mississippi was just because his right as an American citizen to attend any public university was sanctioned by the Constitution. That Barnett chose to ignore this cornerstone concept of American government left Perry neither outraged (as she had been with Faubus) nor indignant (as she had been with Patterson) but philosophical. Having consistently appealed to her readers' respect for the Constitution, she ended this column by appealing to their sense of optimism and couched her appeal in the form of a prediction. Just as she had promised her readers that the Miami NAACP would prevail during the Johns Committee witch-hunts, she now offered a broader promise for Mississippi. Concluding her column with a tone of hope for the future, she wrote, "Even in Mississippi, justice will triumph because the spirit of man is upward and not down."⁵⁷

Perry's postscript on the University of Mississippi riots achieved equilibrium of intellect and emotion and synthesized many of the themes and analyses of previous columns. After noting that it had

56. *Ibid.*, 4 November 1961.

57. *Ibid.*, 13 October 1962.

cost American taxpayers millions of dollars to maintain protection for James Meredith at the university, Perry took a broader view of the price of segregation and racial hatred. Returning to her concern for constitutional principles, she asserted that the “democratic structure of [the U.S.] suffer[ed] whenever there [arose] a situation such as ... the University of Mississippi [because of] the breaking down of democratic ideals.” Perry included an appeal to her readers’ better natures, in this case encouraging them to view their struggle for civil rights within the larger context of human rights.⁵⁸ She ended her last column on a civil rights event by reminding her audience that “one human being keep[ing] another human being from enjoying his rights and privileges ... [was] unnecessary and ... evil.”⁵⁹ Other than a brief reference to James Meredith, there was no mention of Ross Barnett or any other individual in Perry’s last column on the University of Mississippi riots.⁶⁰ Her focus was no longer on one person but on the common humanity of all people. She had found her voice.

By 1963, Perry had not only found her voice as a journalist but had also seen her work as an activist justified. The Miami chapter had won its US Supreme Court case against the Johns Committee and would never be forced to surrender any Florida records. That victory, in turn, had generated the branch’s largest growth in membership. As membership increased into the mid-1960s, Perry became less involved in chapter affairs. No one knows for certain why she became less active, but Perry’s daughter offers the simplest and most plausible explanation: Perry had helped the chapter and her colleagues survive their most difficult years, and she felt that they—and the next generation of activists—had the necessary resources to continue the chapter’s work. With a major legal victory and a growing membership list, she believed the Miami chapter would thrive.⁶¹ Whatever the reason for her reduced involvement, it is clear that Ruth Perry was no armchair activist. Working on the front lines and at the grassroots level in the 1950s and early 1960s, very little about the civil rights movement was theoretical to her. Thus, while Perry did not hesitate to raise her voice as an activist, she also worked to elevate that voice as a journalist. In the end, the activist and the journalist spoke as one.

58. *Ibid.*, 12 January 1963.

59. This excludes her announcement of the NAACP’s victory in the Gibson case.

60. Perry, “Along Freedom’s Road,” *Miami Times*, 12 January 1963.

61. Perry-Kilburg, interview by author, 31 August 2002