H-Net Reviews
in the Humanities & Social Sciences

Emilye Crosby. *A Little Taste of Freedom: The Black Freedom Struggle in Claiborne County, Mississippi.* Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2005. xv + 354 pp. $55.00, cloth, ISBN 978-0-8078-2965-3.

Reviewed by Ann Short Chirhart

Published on H-South (December, 2006)

Beginning in the 1990s, historians began to re-examine the civil rights movement through its chronology, leadership strategies, tactics, and the impact of federal legislation such as the Voting Rights Act in 1965.[1] Emilye Crosby's recent work, *A Little Taste of Freedom*, is a welcome addition to these studies because she engages these arguments and adds to them. Among the many themes she explores are the chronology of the movement in Claiborne County, successful tactics, the role of leadership, the use of self-defense, the impact of national legislation and court cases on a community, the complicated roles of African Americans and whites, and the legacy of the movement. Using an impressive range of oral history interviews, including those with whites, *A Little Taste of Freedom* reveals how complex the civil rights movement was in some communities as African Americans and whites responded to it in a variety of ways and at different times, although in the end, white supremacy prevailed.

In Claiborne County, south of the Delta, expectations of African Americans began to change following World War II similar to counties across the South. In Port Gibson, African Americans attempted unsuccessfully to control wages and conditions at Port Gibson Veneer and Box Company. As the number of sharecroppers declined, African Americans now worked at the box factory or as day laborers and domestics. Joined by an increasing number of African Americans in the aspiring class, those with some economic independence, Reverend Eugene Spencer worked with whites to try to improve African American schools. In 1945, Claiborne County Training School (CCTS) remained overcrowded and underfunded. Attuned to recent U.S. Supreme Court decisions that called for equalization of African American schools, local white voters feared outside pressure and approved a bond issue to improve the school in 1947.

To whites, relations with African Americans were good. Whites controlled African Americans' labor and kept them in a subordinate role, blinded by assumptions of good relations. Yet African Americans recalled insults, exploitation, and a lack of power. To accomplish anything, they had to rely on the goodwill of whites and Port Gibson's

white power structure. The school bond vote in 1947 was but one example of this.

The local Lion's Club, whose membership consisted of white families tied through generations, was another example of how dominant whites controlled institutions and opportunities for African Americans. The Lion's Club frequently determined who taught at neighboring Alcorn College for African Americans and where funds were allocated in the city and county. Segregation was firmly entrenched.

In 1951, African Americans had organized and expanded the local branch of the NAACP and requested a charter from the national organization. At least seventy African Americans joined the organization. So before 1954, the year in which ***Brown v. Board of Education, Topeka*** was handed down from the U.S. Supreme Court, African Americans had begun to organize for their rights. Even though some members of the NAACP, like Revered Spencer, continued to rely on favors from whites for these changes, other members were determined to obtain voting rights on their own. Thus, Crosby demonstrates some distinctions between African American leaders even before the 1960s.

But in 1954, even this seemingly milder version of white supremacy changed in Clairborne County. Here is where Crosby makes a significant point. While some historians have recently reconsidered the chronology of the civil rights movement, pushing it back to the New Deal, Crosby demonstrates that this part of the movement began, as previous historians argued, after ***Brown v. Board of Education***. A local Citizens' Council was formed, members of the NAACP were harassed or fired from their jobs, and the Mississippi legislature passed more stringent rules about voter registration. The infamous literacy tests in Claiborne County appeared after ***Brown***, not before. White trustees purged the faculty at Alcorn College and appointed a new president, J. D. Boyd, who supported the white status quo.

While NAACP membership declined and the county remained on the sidelines of Council of Federated Organizations' (COFO) voter registration drives in the Delta, Claiborne County African Americans continued to look for opportunities to advance their rights. In 1965, Reverend Eugene Spencer, still relying on traditional working relations with whites, formed the Human Relations Committee (HRC). Yet other African Americans sought stronger measures to work for change, and when Rudy Shields rejuvenated the NAACP, he found numerous African Americans eager to work for faster results. A testament to African Americans' determination to gain their rights, Shields and the NAACP quickly overshadowed Spencer's traditional approach to negotiations with whites. African Americans wanted action now.

Crosby's detailed analysis of African American leaders reveals different approaches to gaining civil rights and also illuminates dilemmas of leadership styles. As Charles Evers moved into Claiborne County to organize a boycott in 1966 and force changes in Alcorn College leadership, his approach, like that of the NAACP, was organizing from the top down, not from the grassroots. While the economic boycott was a success, Evers's style had consequences for Claiborne County's future. Accustomed to looking to one leader for guidance, most African Americans lost the opportunity to learn organizational tactics on their own.

More to the point, Evers and the NAACP initiated the boycott after the Voting Rights Act was passed by the U.S. Congress, indicating that African Americans still lacked equal access to the franchise and economic opportunities. The response from Port Gibson whites to the boycott recalls the laments of white slaveholders after the Civil War. Shocked and angry, local whites blamed the new militancy on outside agitators and communists.

The boycott also illuminated gender constructions within the African American community. How could an economic boycott succeed without African American women selecting how and when to buy goods or how to barter for others? African American women, Crosby notes, were vital to the boycott's success and the vitality of the NAACP. Yet similar to the national NAACP, women played a subordinate role. Neither leaders nor organizers, their role was necessary, but often taken for granted. At the same time, African American men found ways of expressing their masculinity during the boycott by using tactics of self-defense. Calling themselves the Deacons for Defense, African American men made clear that they intended to protect themselves, their families, and their property even as they supported non-violence.

Following the successful end of the boycott in 1967, Charles Evers's reputation grew in the NAACP and with white liberals who looked for an alternative to the Mississippi Freedom Democrat Party. As some African Americans began to call for black power, Evers increasingly seemed to be an alternative to radical black activism. Moreover, Evers and the Sovereignty Commission struck a deal to end the boycott. Thus, the NAACP joined forces with white liberals and some segregationists to end a boycott. Here the reader finds strange partners indeed.

Notwithstanding the success of the boycott, Crosby contends that the legacy of the civil rights movement in Claiborne County was one of polarization. African Americans gained the right to vote, but whites continued to preserve their dominance. Some African Americans remained intimidated by the voting process because of white retaliation. When the U. S. Supreme Court demanded integrated schools, whites fled public schools and built private academies across the county. Port Gibson merchants filed a lawsuit against the NAACP for economic losses during the boycott, a case that remained in the court system until 1982, increasing the breach between African Americans and whites. Still, African Americans insist that they gained their dignity. They also won races in local elections. These factors changed power relations between the races even as economic inequality persists.

A Little Taste of Freedom details the divisions between African Americans and whites as far as strategies and goals and the consequences of their actions. White moderates refused to don white robes or set their dogs against African American children. Yet they never attempted to change the rigid white supremacy that governed the county. Nor did they even try to give school integration a chance or stand up for African American voting rights. Historians are beginning to look more closely at various responses from whites during the civil rights movement. Crosby presents moderates as those who may not have committed overt acts of violence, but nonetheless tolerated covert acts of violence because they refused to accept African Americans as equals, actions that are simply a variation of white supremacy.

At times, Crosby confuses the reader with numerous names of African Americans and whites in Claiborne County. Using fewer names would make the narrative clearer. Using oral histories could be debated as well. What are southern whites willing to say about their actions during the civil rights movement? But Crosby's analysis of the movement will provide historians with new questions and challenges in future studies. African Americans and whites divided among themselves on what to change and how to change it. How can communities recover after following a single leader who eventually leaves? How are we to understand white supremacists, some of whom may have supported equalization but could not accept integration? Crosby's book sets a standard for future community studies in other states, studies that are imperative for understanding how diverse the civil rights movement was.

Note

[1]. Robert Norrell, ***Reaping the Whirlwind: The Civil Rights Movement in Tuskegee*** (New York: Knopf, 1985); Charles M. Payne, ***I've Got the Light of Freedom: The Organizing Tradition and the Mississippi Freedom Struggle*** (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1995); Glenn T. Eskew, ***But for Birmingham: The Local and National Movements in the Civil Rights Struggle*** (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1997); and Adam Fairclough, _Race and Democracy: The Civil Rights Struggle in Louisiana, 1915-1972 (Athens: University of Georgia Press, 1995).