

## **Labor Paeans—March 2002**

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### **W.J. and Curt** by Ira Grupper

**Curtis Styles, a graduate of Southern University in Louisiana and a veteran of many civil rights campaigns, entered Columbia, Mississippi, in the southern part of the state (near where he had grown up), at the end of 1963 or maybe early 1964. He had a pack on his back, and the names of a few key contacts he had written in code, in case he was accosted by the cops or the Ku Klux Klan. Curtis slept the first night in the woods.**

**The next day he rented a house from a very courageous family—to have anything to do with civil rights workers could mean serious trouble, even death. The house was really a shack, with no indoor toilet. In the winter, the only heat was from the fireplace. We chopped our own wood.**

**Soon this shack was transmogrified into the Freedom House, the center of civil rights activity in Marion County.**

**About three days after Curt set up shop, I walked Willis Johnson McClinton. He said, “My name is W.J. McClinton. I just quit my job. I am here to fight for freedom”. That is exactly what he said, Curt would later tell me.**

**W.J. was a third-grade school dropout. He was, at best, functionally illiterate. W.J. earned his living hauling pulpwood; he had massive physical strength. Soon Curt and W.J. were everywhere, organizing what would later become the Marion County branch of the M.F.D.P., the Mississippi Freedom Democratic Party. Blacks at that time were not allowed to join the Mississippi Democratic Party, so they formed the M.F.D.P.**

**Soon came the summer of 1964, and young northern whites and others came down and were trained by Curt and W.J. to do voter registration, set up a Freedom School, desegregate public accommodations, and more. The KKK firebombed the house, and shot high-powered rifle fire into the house—but Curt, W.J. and the others escaped unharmed. The Freedom House was burned but still stood.**

**Curt and I met at a conference in Hattiesburg MS. He recruited me to come to Columbia, which I did around September of 1965. Before that I had been a civil rights worker in Georgia and then in Hattiesburg. Curt, W.J. and I became fast friends. We walked the streets together. No, we actually walked the dusty roads together; where the sidewalk ended and the dirt road began was where the white neighborhood ended and the African American neighborhood began.**

The three of us took up positions a block away with walkie-talkies while four of our compatriots entered and integrated Autry's café...For organizing a boycott of downtown stores, we spent two weeks in jail together. Actually, they were in the same Colored cell, and I was in solitary confinement in a White cell. Altho we could not see each other, and the jailers stopped us when we started singing "Aint gonna let nobody turn me 'round," I can assure you that our bond was so strong we sustained one another thru the ordeal. The three of us worked together for about one year or so.

Curt moved to Philadelphia PA and I to New York City and then Louisville. Curt earned a master's degree in social work, and got a job in a minimum security prison. His charges, mostly young African American first-time offenders, were motivated by Curt to learn to read or improve their reading, using Malcolm X's and other writings he gave them. Curt established a strong rapport with these boys; he was fired for not following established principles of social work.

Curt vowed never to return to social work, and instead drove a truck until he retired at age 54 due to a medical condition. Curtis died, maybe six years ago, and is buried outside Philadelphia. He was 59 years old. I had the honor of saying a few words of eulogy at his funeral.

W.J. remained in Columbia, his hometown. Not only did he become proficient with the English language, but he helped people who had been denied, for example, disability claims, write appeals. He remained, to be sure, rough-hewn, often bawdy, but always an advocate for his people, and, indeed, for all poor and working class people.

W.J. took his last breath on Jan. 23, 2002. He lived seventy three years. He was a good person. He was my friend. He was my brother. I had the honor of eulogizing W.J. at his funeral, held at Friendship Missionary Baptist Church just outside Columbia.

The funeral program states, "W.J. was a Civil Rights leader...who...never started a job he didn't finish. He knew no boundaries when it came to helping someone, no matter the race, origin or gender. He will always be remembered as a strong devoted African American who stood with Dr. Martin Luther King...If there was nothing in the world he could do to help you, there would have been nothing in the world he would do to hurt you."

I don't know if you will find the names Curtis Styles and W.J. McClinton in the compendia and indices of the Civil Rights histories. They were local people who gave their all self-effacingly. They were part of, as SNCC workers would say, a band of brothers and sisters and a circle of trust.

I loved W.J. and Curtis. Honor to their memories, and power to the people.

*[email address snipped]*