In Genuinely Democratic Service, the Servant is Well Served
Edward H. Peeples


Prince Edward County has always been seen as part of the wider circle of the Richmond world and as such has always been a little piece of my life. Ever since I was a small child there were always folks around us who had come to the city from Prince Edward and other “Southside” rural areas for work and to live. As far as I could distinguish in those days, they were just like my people - rural white folks searching for ways to shake the lingering deprivation of the Depression and the scarcity of World War II.

At times when my father had work, my mother had the means to take occasional trips to Lynchburg from Richmond to see her good friends, the Gills. So my very earliest memories of Prince Edward were of these trips, perhaps in 1939 and the early 1940s, on which my mother promised that if I would be a “good boy”, she would stop in Farmville and buy me an ice cream cone.

By the time I was in college in 1953, I found myself, several times each year, in what we knew as “Death Valley” at Hampden-Sydney College playing in some kind of sports event. Little then did I know what had already begun to happen right under my nose in Prince Edward would very soon take grip of me, my state, and my nation.

When the fall of 1959 rolled around and the Prince Edward County public schools were closed to avoid desegregation, I had, thanks to several remarkable people who had in recent years entered my life, broken through my personal wall of white supremacy and now on the other side found myself furious over having been deceived and manipulated on the question of race for my first eighteen years of life. So naturally, I became agitated about the school closing situation. Moreover, I knew much about these people who liked to call themselves white because I had been one of them, and I knew what they would do and not do. It was abundantly clear to me that most whites in this county and in this Commonwealth were not going to let it go. The courts may have, at that time, officially disabled the de jure version of Massive Resistance, but only a fool from another planet could have said that the social psychology and politics of defacto Massive Resistance were dead.

So after the 1959-1960 school year passed, I was convinced that the schools were also not going to open in the Fall of 1960, nor anytime else in the near future. I also saw that those of us who openly agitated for speedy desegregation were few, isolated and ineffective and were expected to pay for our views with all kinds of psychological, social and economic retribution, as well as frequently face the prospect of violence. But I also saw that my anger about all of this did nothing constructive to help the situation or dispel my fatalism.

Somehow my thoughts turned from this rancor and frustration with the insanity of the segregationists to the fate of the black and poor white children who I anticipated being out of school for a long time. I also anguished over what might happen to their parents and other black and poor white adults in the community. What would be their economic lot, what would happen to all the usual interpersonal relationships on which a community depends - if public schools were to be abandoned for any length of time? Of course, I had little to worry about when the prospects for whites of advantage crossed my mind, as the air was thick with talk of the emerging all-white private schools. Everywhere were the fierce signs of defiance and the arrogance of white hegemony. And I knew, read, or heard of few who would or could
be able to halt this mammoth white supremacist juggernaut.
I began then to ponder and discuss with friends specific things we might do, even small or symbolic things? We toyed with the notion that we recruit our friends, work colleagues, folks from the Richmond Council on Human Relations, and sundry acquaintances to volunteer in some fashion one day a week in the county. I spoke with various people involved directly in or well informed about the Prince Edward case. Everyone encouraged me, but advised that we should do nothing which would in any way jeopardize the black plaintiff’s position in the courts. All these conversations convinced me that we should go forward with our idea of a volunteer group offering recreational and educational experiences for the school-less black children and teenagers of Prince Edward on the weekends and that it would in no way damage the argument of the NAACP case.

All of us agreed that while creating leisure and learning experiences might be the explicit and primary objective of our effort, perhaps the more important one would be implicit in our very presence. We would be seen arriving every weekend in Prince Edward, a place being torn by racial division, as a conspicuous corps of volunteers composed of blacks, whites, Asians, youths, seniors, and others from all walks of life, eagerly working together and with local folks, and demonstrating the potential of democratic relationships. In the fundamentalist Baptist church of my youth, we knew this as “witnessin’.

Eugene Pickett, Minister of the First Unitarian Church of Richmond, had long befriended me and had always made his church a sanctuary for interracial meetings and activity, an all too rare prospect in the old Capitol of the Confederacy in those days.1 So I went to see Gene, I think in the early Fall of 1960, to ask him for his counsel. I also had in mind to ask him for a little bit of money from the church for program materials. Although he applauded our basic notion, he advised me that difficulties abounded in the situation and that perhaps this was not a good time for such a project. While I left his office in the little church on Floyd and Harrison disappointed in his response, I did appreciate his argument that you cannot just descend upon a place with a gaggle of people at your convenience and expect to be automatically accepted or achieve very much. You need a timely invitation.

Two or three months passed, and as I had predicted, the Prince Edward County public schools once again did not open for the 1960-1961 session. The noises in my head about doing something in the county just would not be silenced. Fortuitously, the January 1961 meeting of the Virginia Council on Human Relations, featured a visit and presentation by Mrs. Helen Baker of the American Friends Service Committee, who was currently on a staff assignment in Prince Edward County. Of course, I wouldn’t miss that.

She gave a heart wrenching account of the consequences suffered not only by the more than 1,800 school-less black children, but also of so many others who were victims of the rippling side effects of a place without public education. During the Q and A period, I asked Helen, “What specifically can be done? What can individuals with skills, a little time, and a deep concern do for the children in Prince Edward?” She replied, “Come to the county, visit with us and bring whatever skills and activities you are able." This was the gilded invitation I was waiting for.

The next day, I renewed my discussions with my friends and other contacts to further explore how many people we could really assemble for such a venture. I got remarkable and enthusiastic response.

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1 Later Gene Pickett became the President of the Unitarian Universalist Association.
Then after conferring by letter and a couple of snowy-cold visits to Farmville and Helen Baker, I concluded that we could start with a baseball league project for the boys of Farmville. My very first recruit to join me as a volunteer was my younger brother, Steve, who was a recreational leadership major at the Richmond Professional Institute, the forerunner of the present-day Virginia Commonwealth University. He was on both the RPI baseball and basketball teams and worked as a gang worker on the street in Richmond part-time. My other recruit to kick off this first activity was Mich Wilkinson, a young man who grew up on Richmond’s Oregon Hill, then a notorious poor white neighborhood feared by blacks and middle class whites alike. Mich and I had become good friends while playing together for the Paragon Pharmacy team in a semi-pro industrial basketball league.

Needless to say, Helen Baker was on top of things. She arranged for the ball field and located some interested local men to join us in launching the club. She introduced us, announced our first meeting date, and hyped our aims everywhere in the county. She specifically sought and received support for us from the Prince Edward County Christian Association (PECCA). Her mimeographed posters publicizing our effort could be found tacked up all around Farmville.

Back in Richmond, we were able to scrounge up some used equipment and I found abundant support and excellent new ideas from several social workers and a school teacher I knew. So, on a chilly and windy March 4, 1961 about one o’clock in the afternoon, we landed in Farmville carrying a bag of old baseball equipment, various and sundry skills, a great deal of ignorance about the specifics of the situation there, but a fervent desire to do our small part to fill an empty space in the lives of these boys and offer some assurances to them and the men there that they were not alone.

According to our sign-up list collected on that day, twenty boys from ages 10 to 16 turned out. Leading the list was the name of 15 year old James Ghee, who later would be placed by the AFSC in a home in Iowa so that he could attend school. James Ghee ultimately became a prominent lawyer and the President of the Virginia NAACP. To the best of my memory, three men also came to help us. I cannot recall

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2 Steve Peeples went on to earn a M.S.W. and has worked in a wide variety of social work positions for many years.

3 After receiving a doctorate Mich Wilkinson served for many years as the Executive Director of the Virginia State Commission on Local Government until his recent retirement.
everyone’s name, but I am sure that Lenrod Blowe was one of them. Their presence and help was reassuring and proved to be the crucial factor in our building an early bridge of trust with the teens.

It was bone-chilling that day. While our lips turned purple and our fingertips icy, the boys seemed not to mind the cold. They had baseball on their mind. So despite the inhospitable weather, we began to organize a practice session, learning the positions each youngster wished to play and giving every boy plenty of turns at bat. With the help of the three Prince Edward men, we then divided the talent into two more or less equal teams with the six of us adults sharing the coaching and umpire duties. The rest of the afternoon seemed to disappear as we all became lost in the intensity of the game.

While our time on the field all that afternoon was a singularly rewarding experience to us, the weather wasn’t the only force blowing icy wind our way. Shortly after we had arrived from Richmond, two police cars hastily pulled up and parked on the bluff along Ely Street above the playing field. Two white policemen emerged from the vehicles and begun to assume that all too familiar posture and succession of gestures that I had learned long ago was intended to intimidate demonstrators and minorities. It was that invariable habit where they would rest the heal of their hand on their gun that always used to get to me.

The policemen each swaggered back and forth along the bluff, leering at our every move. Occasionally, one would leave in his car and appear on the other side of the field along Main Street. And sometimes they would just sit inside a car with the engine running for a spell, presumably to warm themselves up.

I guess now that I could have suspected that they were assigned to this spot to protect us and control any protests of our use of this Prince Edward County School Board property, but given my prior experience with police in those days, this was not my assumption.

We tried to ignore them and made every effort to convey to the boys that we had no intention of letting them interfere with our fun. This was not easy, nor altogether successful, for I was sure that all of us there harbored some unspoken anxiety about what the policemen might do. After all, they were “the law” and in this segregated society we were the “outlaws”.

The increasingly dark sky began to suggest to us that it was getting late and time to quit. I don’t remember how many innings we played, or the score, or who played on what side, but I do recall well a sensation that I picked up from the boys. Despite the fact that only three hours earlier we were total strangers, these boys seemed to glow with delight that they were now together and engaged in something which they loved. They seemed hungry for active social engagement and while sports might be one such opportunity, they appeared to be longing for much, much more. The accident of us initiating this day for them seemed, despite a lack of any verbal expression of it, to make us instant friends.

The boys scattered from the field in all directions. And as we began to ready ourselves for departure, we spoke with our three adult hosts about next week and what the future might hold for our baseball club. They expressed their gratitude for our getting it all started and they committed to recruiting more boys and adult leaders. They also agreed to assume the major coaching and umpiring responsibilities, if we would continue to assist. It looked like a winner. It made me think - “This situation cries out for a half

4 Ely Street is now known as Griffin Boulevard.
dozen brand new, shiny, pristine white baseballs for next week. Now where am I going to get new baseballs?"

We bid all our new friends goodbye and reminded them of our game next Saturday, same time-same place. Then as we pulled out onto Main Street to head home to Richmond, both patrol cars sped over to catch up with us. They tailed us closely, as in an escort, all the way north through town as if to be looking for an offense for which we could be stopped. As we crossed the Appomattox River bridge and entered Cumberland County, they turned around and headed back south. I had decided to travel home via Virginia route 45 for this very reason - they had no jurisdiction in the next county and using U.S. 460 would have kept us in Prince Edward for another ten or so miles.

At this point our obsession with what the police were up to finally faded and we moved on to rambling about some of the baseball talent we witnessed, about how welcome we had been made to feel by the men and boys, how tragic was the social deprivation of these children because of the school closing, and finally how exciting it was to contemplate going back next Saturday.

That evening and for several weeks to follow, my thoughts turned to what we might now do for the girls, the younger children, and other boys who were not interested in athletics. While we continued to return to Farmville each Saturday for the baseball program, I also began to work intensely on a wider vision for our effort. I consulted on a variety of ideas with many, including Ruby Clayton, my dear friend and colleague at the Richmond Department of Public Welfare where we both worked in segregated units as public assistance caseworkers. After some modest arm-twisting, I was able to convince Ruby to join me in organizing further activities for the children and recruiting the volunteers to carry it off.

We set to work: recruiting our core of volunteers, dreaming up specific activities for the youth, obtaining commitments for automobiles and drivers, soliciting money and materials to be used in the activities, and all the rest. I continued to make contacts with Helen Baker in the county, who among her many other efforts for us, put me in touch with Mrs. Harriet Allen in Farmville. This proved to be extraordinary good fortune for our program since Harriet was not only an enormously respected community activist who had assumed the responsibility for recreational activities and facilities for the black community, but she was a woman of unparalleled amiability, enormous energy and matchless devotion to her community, particularly the youth. We all grew to love her.

Among other things Harriet had done was to lead the Farmville Recreation Association effort to buy and rehabilitate a house off Longwood Aveune as a recreation and community center for activities in the black community. This was a sorely needed and very special place since whites controlled and rarely shared the county’s major public and private facilities for community activity. Harriet set us up for every Saturday to open the Recreation Center for our program and used every means at her disposal to get folks to come out and join us.

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5 Ruby Clayton, whose married name became Walker, later obtained a M.S.W. and became a Faculty member of the School of Social Work at the Virginia Commonwealth University.
The concern for the children of Prince Edward County hit a tender nerve among the small progressive community I knew in central Virginia. The cooperation, enthusiasm, and the number of people who wished to volunteer astounded me. So too did their generosity. We had the good fortune of securing some modest financial gifts from several individuals, the Virginia Council on Human Relations, the First Unitarian Church of Richmond and, of course, we needed also to reach into our own pockets. One longtime merchant in Richmond’s Jackson Ward gave us a whole bolt of fabric and a carton full of spools of thread. With these donations, we were able to provide many of the things we needed for our various activities.

On April 29, 1961, we took an additional car load of volunteers to embark on the second stage of our venture, activities especially designed for the girls and young children - this time at the sparkling, freshly painted Recreation Center. The turnout and the enthusiasm for our visit exceeded everyone’s expectation, even Harriet Allen’s. We conducted a select number of recreational and educational activities for the children and a few of the local adults joined in to help us. But we had more children than we could really handle and the variety of activities was much less than optimum. Nevertheless, a good time was had by all, but it became abundantly clear to everyone that we were severely understaffed - we needed more volunteers.

The next day, on Sunday April 30th, the First Unitarian Church in Richmond, with our prior urging and help, hosted a morale building event for Prince Edward adults, teens and children - an afternoon of movies, music, food and fun things to do. As to be expected, Helen Baker, once again found ways for dozens of participants to travel to Richmond and back.

After this big weekend, we immediately began plans to acquire more people. So we called a recruitment meeting for Wednesday, July 26, 1961 at the First Unitarian Church. Bob Tingle, a student at the University of Richmond, who endured much travail for his commitment to racial progress from his school’s administration and some of the other students, worked hard to get the word about the meeting around town. We were fortunate to obtain two widely known and respected pillars of the Richmond civil rights struggle as keynote speakers for the meeting: Reverend Irvin Elligan, the black Pastor of the All Souls Presbyterian Church and Reverend Eugene Pickett, the white Minister of the First Unitarian Church. The meeting was a singular success and we signed up a couple dozen more volunteers. Meanwhile, Mrs. Allen and Helen Baker both also put out the word for volunteers and came up with a few of their own in the county.

It was around this time that we were beginning to call ourselves the Richmond Committee of Volunteers to Prince Edward. However, we should have been known as the Central Virginia Committee of Volunteers to Prince Edward. For several weeks after the July 26 public meeting and as our present volunteers were beginning to see how satisfying and exciting was the work in Prince Edward, the word further traveled and I began to receive phone calls from lots of other places: Petersburg, Hopewell, the Richmond suburban counties, and several towns across “Southside” Virginia.

So by August, we found ourselves with a working roster of some 90 volunteers: men, women and children of all ages and from a multitude of different racial, ethnic, religious, political and income backgrounds. When we emerged from our automobiles, in this place so fraught with white-black discord, we must have looked like a diorama of the demographic future of America. But we soon learned from the
icy stares, the open hostility, the refusals of service in stores, and the occasional threats of violence which we confronted, that we were indeed a menacing vision to many of the whites of Prince Edward County.

We nevertheless went on with our group and individual activities for dozens and dozens of Prince Edward youths who came to join us each Saturday for sports, games, sewing, dramatics, industrial arts, reading, story telling, African American history, writing, homemaking skills, music, arts and crafts, films, and other activities. Like the boys with their baseball club, the children and teenagers at the Recreation Center appeared to me to be starved for social contact and stimulation. I could see before me case after case of the needless suffocation and privation of these young minds, all because a white oligarchy insisted that their superstitions about white supremacy and purity were more important than the lives of our children.

One lovely sunny Saturday, I turned to see a little white girl, perhaps eight or nine years old hanging on her fence across the road from the Recreation Center, a forlorn look on her face. Her longing eyes were fixed on all the fun-filled activity in the Recreation Center yard: black children from Prince Edward and white children from our Richmond volunteer group squealing with glee as the ran back and forth during their games; a black teenager making yard furniture with a white man on the porch; other children sitting quietly on benches against the white Center building with a dark-skinned woman reading books together.

I invited our young neighbor to come over and join us. My hopes were that some Prince Edward indigenous whites who while they might have initial resistance, after witnessing our example, might come and join our activities. But for this day, my hopes were dashed, as the mother of this child roared out of her house screaming at me to “stop accosting” her child. She scooped up her daughter, shouted that she was “calling the sheriff” and ran inside the house, slamming the screen door behind her.

In about 15 minutes, a deputy patrol unit rolled up the narrow dead end dirt road to the site of the Recreation Center. He got out, rested his right hand on his revolver, scowled at me, walked over to the house of my detractor, and was let in. I found a place in the Recreation Center yard where I could see her house but where I, myself, was out of view. In about five or more minutes, the Deputy came out of the house and began to march up and down the property line of the Recreation Center, carefully scrutinizing all the happy preoccupied children and adults in the yard. Apparently, with his appetite for snooping finally satiated, he returned to his patrol car and backed down the road out of sight. I saw no more of him that day and I don’t think of our folks observed anything of what had transpired, as I never was to hear any comments about the episode.

In September of 1961, I left Richmond for Philadelphia to enter graduate school at the University of Pennsylvania but my visits to Prince Edward, I was to discover, were hardly to be diminished. But at this time, Ruby Clayton assumed most of leadership duties of the Richmond Committee of Volunteers to Prince Edward. She enjoyed able assistance from many of the volunteers, especially Blanche Hope Smith. The volunteers continued their visits and work in Prince Edward for about another year, when conditions in the county changed in such a way that other larger and more firmly established organizations with greater resources, such as the Virginia Teachers Association, the black state teachers group, began to do some of the same work and more on a much larger scale.

One might wonder what we think was accomplished and what might have been the shortcomings of our effort. Let’s begin with our regrets.
It was unfortunate that, because of limitations of human and material resources, the program had to be confined only to Saturdays, and to only very occasional Sundays and weekday evenings, and that many of the volunteers had to travel sometimes as much as an hour each way. It was also lamentable that we could not find the time and the resources to work in a more concentrated way to attract more Prince Edward whites into our activities. We also were disappointed in the limited number of volunteers in the county on some given weekends. Despite the sometimes dip in the number, there were always at least a 2-4 people there for every scheduled weekend for the entire length of the program, except, of course, during holidays and times which were in competition with other significant events in the county.

We were also dissatisfied that our program, like so many other initiatives which came to Prince Edward during this period, was centered in Farmville and the rural areas of the county were neglected in some ways. The fact is that nearly two-thirds of the county population lived outside of Farmville and where transportation was often a problem, folks in those areas just did not have access to many of the sustaining and enriching activities afforded those in town.

Despite these deficiencies, I am convinced that some very good things resulted from our project. For one thing, it probably served over its lifetime some 400-450 different children. Also, a lot of very good people met and came to know a lot of other very good people. A number of folks, we later learned, were touched by the example of our service with our dedicated socially diverse group. Many, including myself, made some lifelong friends and contacts which have figured significantly in our later life and work. Also several of the local people picked up the leadership for some of the activities we began, such as the men who continued the baseball project and some of our activities at the Recreation Center were grafted onto programs later carried by the Farmville Recreation Association.

One of the major lessons I carried away from the Richmond Committee of Volunteers to Prince Edward experience was a new awareness of the vast potential for youth biracial involvement in the civil rights movement in Virginia, an idea which was to consume me in 1963 and 1964 when I worked to organize a College Council on Human Relations under the aegis of the Virginia Council on Human Relations. But once again it was Prince Edward County people, the Miller building, the American Friends Service Committee and their new worker in the county, Nancy Adams, who would prove to be key ingredients in achieving good things for yet another good cause. But then that is story for another day.

Before I forget - there was another, not so lofty but nevertheless useful, benefit accruing to me - I learned

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6 These estimates and conclusions, as well as other portions of this paper, are derived from my notes, flyers, correspondence, and the best of Ruby Clayton Walker’s and my memory. Some of these sources are listed in the Appendices. Several attempts were made to locate other volunteers but were unsuccessful. Most of the records from the project, which operated some forty years ago, have long been lost.
inch by inch every one of the alternative primary, secondary, and dirt roads which lead to Farmville from Richmond.

Finally, I have come to believe that in any worthwhile evaluation of such a program, one must look closely for its most concealed and uncelebrated effects. Otherwise, one may never come to know all of the little known words of great consequence spoken, all of the obscure but enriching events experienced, all of the abiding and inspiring memories made, all of the heartwarming encounters among those who society have unjustly kept apart, and the heightened sense of community created where only solitude had dwelt before. I still clutch firmly to these treasured lessons.

**Endnotes**

1. Later Gene Pickett became the President of the Unitarian Universalist Association.

2. Steve Peeples went on to earn a M.S.W. and has worked in a wide variety of social work positions for many years.

3. After receiving a doctorate Mich Wilkinson served for many years as the Executive Director of the Virginia State Commission on Local Government until his recent retirement.

4. Ely Street is now known as Griffin Boulevard.

5. Ruby Clayton, whose married name became Walker, later obtained a M.S.W. and became Faculty member of the School of Social Work at the Virginia Commonwealth University.

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**Appendices**

*Photographs:*

115 -- Ball field with Robert Russa Moton High School (known as Branch Elementary School in 1962) in the background. This is one of the two sites where the Richmond Volunteers to Prince Edward county conducted recreational activities for school-less black teenage boys in 1961-1962. Longwood College had taken possession of the field by 1998 and made the improvements seen here. This image dates from 2001.

78 -- Recreation Center of Longwood Avenue purchased for $5,000 and improved by Prince Edward County African American citizens through their Farmville Recreation Association. It is used as a community center for African Americans throughout the county. It was also the site of activities conducted by the Richmond Committee of Volunteers to Prince Edward. The benches shown in the yard were made by youngsters and volunteers involved
in the Richmond Volunteer program.

100B -- Miller building, with street sign, site of Helen Baker's office and many meetings of the Richmond Committee of Volunteers to Prince Edward, the Virginia College Council on Human Relations, and many other local and state organizations and groups.

*Flyers:*
The Richmond Committee of Volunteers to Prince Edward, meeting invitation dated July 19, 1961
Recreation and Sports, program announcement

*Correspondence:*
February 15, 1961, from Helen Baker
February 23, 1961, from Helen Baker
February 28, 1961, from Helen Baker
April 20, 1961, from Helen Baker
April 23, 1961, from Helen Baker #1
April 23, 1961, from Helen Baker #2
May 4, 1961, from Helen Baker
July 19, 1961, from Lenrod L. Blowe
August 26, 1961, from Harriet Allen

*Miscellaneous*
List of Boys Who Signed Up for Baseball, March 4, 1961