The 1960s and a few years on either side of it were a watershed time. The national consciousness was pricked. Its raw throbbing reached people everywhere in the country, all ages and races. Many merely gained awareness of the depths of our racism. But many rolled up their sleeves, electrified by the opportunity to work together to alleviate a long-standing injustice, a long-standing conflict in who we are as a country and as Americans. They made change happen.

All those who became involved in the civil rights movement were courageous and gutsy. The chaotic years were filled with assassinations, murders and murderers both known and unknown. There was civil unrest unlike any that had been seen in many years. And all this was just on U.S. soil!

In 1967 I went to Jackson, Mississippi, as a civil rights attorney with the Lawyers’ Committee for Civil Rights Under Law. Originally, I went to Jackson in March as a volunteer for a month, but was so appalled at what was happening that I returned a month later as a permanent staff member. In 1969, I went on to Cairo, Illinois, as chief counsel of the Lawyers’ Committee office there. For those of you wondering who is the Martha Mills who is writing this, when I was in Mississippi and Cairo, I was going by the name Martha Wood. I went back to Mills, the name I was born with, later.

I thought the details of those years were buried in my memory. But I had written long letters to friends and family—more in March of 1967 when I was still a volunteer, and fewer and further between thereafter. There is a lot of detail in the first letters, as Mississippi and what the Lawyers’ Committee was doing there was unfolding to me on an almost daily basis. The letters are a lot sparser after my return as a staff attorney. I worked very long hours. I was frequently away from home where there was no typewriter (long before today’s plethora of transportable communications capabilities). And, I was “home” and had a life and friends when I was
not working. These letters are the basis for this book of recollections about this time in my life. Some were saved by a friend and recently returned to me. Some, I am sorry to say, are forever lost. The letters have provided a number of details and jogged my memory on many others.

Many, many people, black and white, native Mississippians and those from outside the state, did wonderful and frightening things during the 1960s. If I have not remembered specifics of who did what, I am sorry that I did not have the foresight to think I might be writing this some fifty years later. Sorry, both for me and for the reader who may be curious. I hope it will spur the interested reader to learn more and research these times for themselves because history is an insight into our future.

The “modern” civil rights movement that culminated in the 1960s started many years before I became involved, and those years are filled with a chorus of people on many sides of the issues, some who are mentioned here and many who are not. Unfortunately, many things in life are experienced personally in pieces, with incomplete knowledge of what preceded or followed them. Nevertheless, even the pieces have value and tell us much about what was going on.

My years with the Lawyers’ Committee were, like many soldiers’ war experiences, long remembered and valued for being exciting, scary, and satisfying because I was fighting, for both myself and others, to make realities out of deeply held values. More important, these were years that taught me a great deal about the courage, magnanimity, and humanity of people. They were years in which laughter was found in the sorriest situations in order merely to deal with them and continue. They were years that even taught me compassion for adversaries whose humanity was consumed in anger, hatred, and self-loathing that erupted in unimaginable physical violence, mental cruelty, and degradation. They were years in which friendships were formed through adversity and laughter that would last forever. They were years that formed the foundation of the work I have done for the rest of my life.

Looking back at my life up to when I headed to Mississippi, I always remembered that my parents told me, over and over, that people were all equal, that justice, fairness, and brotherhood were all values to cherish,
to believe in and work toward. I took that advice to heart even though I knew their actions did not always match their teachings.

Considering it now, I think we all drink in a different reality from our parents, since we live in a different world, however great or small the differences. We form our values based on much that we learn but also on how, consciously and unconsciously, we see or perceive the world we are exposed to.

I started at a different place from my parents just as they started at a different place from theirs. Names such as Crispus Attucks, Sojourner Truth and Harriet Tubman, Frederick Douglass, Nat Turner, W.E.B Du Bois, Booker T. Washington, and Ida B. Wells-Barnett rang through history and were familiar to me, and perhaps to my parents, though I knew nothing about their knowledge, or appreciation, of history.

But times were different. As I grew up, blacks had made huge, if clearly not satisfactory, strides. They were a part of the landscape without my even having to think about it. Dr. Ralph Bunche won the Nobel Peace Prize in 1950. Jackie Robinson broke the color line in major sports in 1947, and there were many black players by the time I was a teen.1 There were famous, and adored, black musicians too numerous to mention; but everyone knew the names and music of Louis Armstrong, Duke Ellington, Cab Calloway, Ella Fitzgerald, Charlie Parker, John Coltrane, Sarah Vaughan, Lena Horne, Lionel Hampton, and scores of others. The second record album I ever bought, right after Ferde Grofé’s “Grand Canyon Suite,” was Duke Ellington’s “Take the A Train.”

When I was a teen, whenever Ramsey Lewis was playing at the famous Sutherland Lounge at 47th and Drexel in Chicago, I tried to find a way to sneak out and get there. I wasn’t often successful, but I remember being surreptitiously allowed by regular Sutherland Lounge Ramsey Lewis fans to hide in a corner and drink in the music, albeit not the alcohol served adults.

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1. These included, important to me and many Chicagoans, Ernie Banks of the Chicago Cubs. He was, for decades and decades, admired and cherished. He died in 2015 at the age of 84.
Billie Holiday spanned the same period, famous for many songs, from “Strange Fruit,” taken from a poem about the lynching of two men in Indiana in 1930, to her autobiography and song of the same name, “Lady Sings the Blues” in 1956. “Strange Fruit” became almost a black anthem, certainly an anti-lynching anthem. She sang it with dimmed lights, silence, and often tears. Both the song and lynchings were still current in the 1960s. The song was later a staple of Nina Simone, one of my favorite singers of all time.

World War II had ended, but everyone was aware that of the returning veterans, blacks made up a substantial number. The highly successful exploits of the Tuskegee Airmen were known. Because my dad had been in the Army Air Corps, which became the Air Force in 1947, I was well aware of their existence and incredible record. I was also aware of the many hardships and difficulties placed in their way. Many black soldiers in all the services were highly decorated. Many people were aware of President Truman’s executive order integrating the armed forces, if not aware that it was a bit wishy-washy and very imperfectly implemented.

Even so, for the adult majority of America as I grew up, the term “civil rights” as such wasn’t part of the lexicon. Not only was it not part of the lexicon, but also the issue was ignored unless something the media viewed as “news” occurred. Newsworthy meant high-profile outrages, from the much earlier and well-known refusal to let Marian Anderson sing in Constitution Hall in 1939 to the murder of Emmett Till in 1955.

In the mid-1950s, the notion of civil rights was thrust into the national consciousness in the courts. There were inklings of what was to come in the area of school desegregation in Supreme Court cases dealing with graduate schools. While they did not overrule Plessy v. Ferguson, the famous 1896 case that permitted “separate but equal” education for blacks and whites, they did stretch the meaning of equality awfully close to the later holding that separate education by itself is unequal. These cases culminated, shortly after California’s governor Earl Warren took the bench as chief justice of the United States Supreme Court, in Brown v. Board of Education\(^2\) on May 17, 1954. Two of the cases that were consolidated as part

\(^2\) Brown v. Board of Education, 347 U.S. 483 (1954); see Ch. 2.
of the *Brown* case were significantly, to me, fueled by students, not adults. The country exploded. The South dug in its heels, threatening to ignore *Brown* as a gross abuse of authority by the Supreme Court.

The North had mixed reactions, though it by and large failed to recognize that it too was guilty of racial discrimination. It was clear that the entire country would have to come to grips with a situation that had festered since the founding of the country. It was also clear that the Civil War had not resolved the problem, as what has been called Reconstruction largely died in the late 1870s.