

February One

A film review by Paul T. Miller

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February One, 2004. Executive Producer: Dr. Steven Channing. Video Dialog. Duration: 57 minutes (available in DVD or VHS, distributor: California Newsreel).

February One is an hour-long documentary that focuses on the four friends who initiated the Greensboro sit-in movement, thereby jumpstarting a wave of civil rights direct action protests across the South. Using dramatic reenactments, ethnographic interviews, photo stills and archival footage, this Video Dialog film explores the intensely personal motives behind Ezell Blair, Jr. (Jibreel Khazan), Franklin McCain, Joseph McNeil and David Richmond collective decision to sit-in at a downtown Woolworth's lunch counter, and the enormous public impact this decision would have on the civil rights movement.

Beginning with photo stills and archival footage, *February One* claims that from the end of the Montgomery Bus Boycott in 1957 to the beginning of the sit-in movement on February 1, 1960 there was nearly no action in the civil rights movement. It was into this dormant atmosphere that three high school friends and another that they would befriend at North Carolina A & T started what Franklin McCain describes as a "strictly personal" journey to gain manhood and dignity. Blair, McCain and Richmond, friends from Dudley High School, met McNeil at A&T and the four became fast friends who would discuss ideals and ideas in "dorm sessions", evening talks that focused on how to make their community a better and more equal place. It was during one of these dorm sessions, shortly after Joe McNeil came home from New York after the winter break, that the sit-in plan was conceived. McNeil, accustomed to life in an integrated New York City, experienced racism as he never had in Greensboro. Incensed by this bigotry, he challenged his friends to do something to counteract it.

Prior to their actions, the film describes Greensboro as a typical southern city more focused on day-to-day life than it was on making headlines. Racial borders were rigid and African American parents would caution their children to avoid confrontations, especially with whites. However, despite the appearance of relative calm, the yearning for equality and dignity that racial segregation stifled would emerge in the actions of four A&T freshmen. On January 31, 1960 the four friends planned to demand their rights by taking seats at a "whites only" lunch counter at the downtown Woolworth's.

Backed by the conviction that they needed to do something but alone in their actions, the young men bought a few items from the store to prove they were paying customers deserving of seats at the counter and took their seats. When asked by the waitress what they wanted they replied simply that “they’d like to be served”.

Two incidents stand out in this first day. The first is the remarks made by an African American Woolworth’s employee who came out to talk to the men as they sat at the counter. She told them they were starting trouble and that it was people like them that made the race look bad. This woman’s response is characteristic of the conservative mind-set of many southern Blacks during this time. Violence or the threat thereof was very real in the South of the 1950s and the consequences of acting out of place had been made starkly clear in the 1955 murder of Emit Till, a young man who was mutilated and killed for making what whites perceived an inappropriate comment to a white woman. Likely fearing for the safety of these young men, the Black woman’s comments are clearly understandable in context. Next is the encouragement that Frank McCain and the group got from an elderly white woman. As the group sat at the counter this woman sat next to McCain and expressed disappointment. When McCain asked why she was disappointed she answered, “Because it took you so long to do this”.

Bolstered by their own feelings of accomplishment and the lack of any real resistance that day, Khazan, McCain, McNeil and Richmond exited the store after it closed. In an interview Franklin McCain explains that as a result of their first simple action, sitting at the segregated lunch counter, he immediately felt that he gained a piece of his manhood and felt “clean”. The group vowed to return the following day when questioned by reporters. However, because they thought it would be more effective if they had a larger group upon their return, they spent that evening trying to convince A&T student leaders that their actions were no hoax and that they needed help. Although many leaders pledged support not a single one showed up for the second day of protests, leaving the group to go it alone again, this time with a more hostile crowd of whites.

What is telling about the sit-ins, is that they happened at a time when television was becoming standard in American households. Therefore, the actions of these four friends, while never an attempt to “change the world”, indeed initiated a widespread movement of sit-ins across the South within just days. In fact, the media, both print and television, made the sit-ins and racial equality headline news across the entire nation.

Although one former A&T student described the direct action protests in Greensboro as the “birthplace of a whirlwind” that would go on to ignite the Civil Rights Movement, there was also unintended and unfortunate consequences that followed. In the end, February One documents the decline of downtown Greensboro, the result of businesses moving out to the suburbs in a trend mirrored in cities all over the nation. Further, David Richmond, the one man identified as “the calming force” of the four, stayed behind in Greensboro as the others moved away after college.

For Richmond, the stigmatism of being an instigator and “radical” stuck and he found it difficult to keep jobs and maintain his relationships. In the end, he would be the first of the group to pass on December 7, 1990 leaving an epitaph that reads, “Love Leads To Freedom”.

February One uses interviews, mainly of the three surviving pioneers of the sit-ins, to tell the story of the Greensboro movement. By allowing the participants to tell their own stories, the viewer is drawn into the film in a way that is both meaningful and authentic. Additionally, the archival footage is well placed and allows the viewer to put himself in that space and time. Less effective are the dramatized reenactments that work to contextualize the narratives but also create melodramatic moments that are overly sentimental. However, in total, the film is both educational and gripping, showing how every-day people who hold strong convictions can start a progressive movement if they just decide to act on their impulses.

For Khazan, McCain, McNeil and Richmond, the Greensboro sit-ins were life-altering experiences that fostered in them a sense of manhood and dignity that they likely could not have achieved elsewhere. For the nation, the sit-ins sparked a wave of non-violent protest against racial segregation. Toward the end of the film, a former A&T student notes that the movement in Greensboro was just made up of ordinary people. It is clear though that we should remain mindful that these four men and those that followed in their footsteps had a lasting positive impact on American society and have earned a spot in history.