

# the one-man crusade



**WILLIAM LEWIS MOORE**

1927-1963

Slain during a one-man march against segregation, Attalla, Ala.

A group of black students stood in line at a whites-only movie theater in Baltimore in the winter of 1963, waiting to buy tickets but expecting to go to jail. Sure enough, the police arrived and began arresting the students, one by one, for trespassing. In the midst of the black students the police were astonished to see a white man, Bill Moore. A puzzled officer asked Moore if he understood that he was in line to be arrested. Moore explained simply that if the others couldn't see the movie because of the color of their skin, then he didn't want to see it either. He spent that night in jail.

No one in Bill Moore's hometown of Binghamton, N.Y., was surprised at his willingness to go to jail. Moore was known for standing up for his beliefs, even when he stood alone, as he usually did. One time Moore braved 16-degree weather to walk alone for hours in front of a Binghamton courthouse, carrying a sign that read "Turn Toward Peace."

## A RARE IDEALIST

Although he had served with the Marines on Guam in World War II, Moore was a pacifist. He had a degree in social sciences and had studied in England and France. After his return to the United States, Moore became very depressed by the passing of a mentor. A family member urged him to seek professional help, and he voluntarily institutionalized himself. The diary he maintained while institutionalized became a book entitled *The Mind in Chains*.

Upon re-entering society in 1954, Moore started one of the first self-help groups for recovering mental patients. He self-published a monthly magazine that contained helpful medical articles, listed community group homes and halfway houses and, most importantly, offered hope. He took a job as a social worker, and before he left that job, he had given nearly \$3,000 of his own money to his clients. He also worked as a substitute teacher and eventually took a civil service position with the U.S. Postal Service.

Bill Moore was gifted, some would say cursed, with a reflexive conscience — one that automatically recognized human need and automatically responded to it. Moore knew that people laughed at his idealism, but he was never ashamed of it. He married a woman who appreciated his uniqueness and gave him confidence to pursue his dreams.

He transferred as a letter carrier from Binghamton to Baltimore, looking for a place where he could have more impact. If things worked out there, the family would join him.

In Baltimore, Moore worked as a substitute mail carrier and devoted his free time to writing and demonstrating. Although he joined a local chapter of the Congress of Racial Equality (CORE), Moore never fit comfortably into the civil rights organizational mold. He cared little about political strategies. He felt individuals could be agents of social change simply by acting on their beliefs.

To make his point, Moore used a tactic that seemed natural for a postman: He walked.

He walked alone from Baltimore to the state capitol in Annapolis to protest segregation. Later he walked to Washington, D.C., to deliver a letter to President Kennedy at the White House. (A guard there told him to put the letter in a mailbox.)

Undaunted, Moore made plans for a much longer walk — from Chattanooga, Tenn., to Jackson, Miss. — to deliver a letter in which he urged Gov. Ross Barnett to accept integration.

## THE LAST WALK

Moore had little encouragement for his march to Jackson. CORE, which had sponsored the bloody Freedom Rides two years earlier, withheld support from Moore's march because leaders considered it too dangerous and too limited to be effective. Even Mary, Moore's wife, tried to discourage him.

When Moore wrote to relatives in the South about his plans, they responded with bitter criticism. One aunt wrote back saying, "Our home will be closed to you on a trip of this nature... You'll probably find out when you hit this section of the South what you are doing is not a joke after all." She signed the letter, "With love, and a prayer to God that he will deliver you from this thing that has taken possession of you."

After his mother died when he was just a toddler, Moore spent much of his childhood with his grandparents in Mississippi, and he still felt a strong connection to the region. He tried not to take his aunt's criticism personally, and he didn't let it stop him.

Moore scheduled vacation time and prepared to make his





walk. Wearing pro-integration signs and pushing a two-wheeled utility cart of clothing and supplies, he left the Chattanooga bus station on April 21, 1963. Shortly after he crossed the Alabama state line on the first day of his journey, he was accosted by motorists screaming “nigger-lover” and throwing rocks. He wrote casually about the incident in his journal, and he apparently had no fear.

The next day, he befriended a stray dog that followed him. By the end of that day his feet were blistered, and the next day’s walk was painful.

Just south of Collbran, Ala.,

a white storeowner named Floyd Simpson heard about a man who was wearing signs about integration, and he decided to go find him. Moore was happy to stop for a while and explain his views on racial equality to Simpson.

Later, Moore stopped at a grocery store and gave his tagalong dog to some children there. On his way down U.S. Highway 11 toward Gadsden, he stopped on the roadside to rest. He made his last journal entries: “Feet sore all over. Shoes too painful...Kids adopt dog.”

As he was resting by the road in Keener that evening, Moore

was killed by bullets fired at close range from a .22-caliber rifle. Ballistics tests later proved the rifle belonged to Floyd Simpson, but no one was ever indicted for the murder.

In death, Moore earned the public credibility that had never been his in life. Alabama Gov. George Wallace and President Kennedy denounced the killing. Civil rights organizations held marches and memorial services. Within a month, 29 young people were arrested in Alabama for trying to finish the walk begun by William Moore. They were carrying signs that read “Mississippi or Bust.”

Students who never knew William Moore continued the march he began. Many of them were arrested and went to jail.