

# “The Great Agitator”: Golden A. Frinks

By Shirl Spicer

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*Soul Power! . . . Soul Power!*

*Black Power! . . . Black Power!*

*People Power! . . . People Power!*

*Right on! . . . Right on!*

With fists raised, members of the audience paid homage to “The Great Agitator” on July 24, 2004, as North Carolina laid to rest one of its greatest unsung heroes of the Civil Rights movement—Golden Asro Frinks. For most of his eighty-four years, Golden Frinks led generations of young and old, African American and American Indian to take a stand and demand their “equal part to enjoy the fruits of America.”

Who was this “Great Agitator” and “Mr. Civil Rights,” as those closest to him affectionately called him? Born in Horry County, South Carolina, on April 26, 1920, Golden Frinks grew up in Tabor City after his family moved to North Carolina. When he was seventeen, he moved to Edenton. Frinks was a United States Army veteran who served during World War II as a staff sergeant at Fort McCullough, Alabama. Following active duty, he returned to Edenton, eventually married Ruth Holley, and began the fight to obtain equal rights for the local population of African Americans.

Frinks’s career as a civil rights activist and organizer began in 1956 with a movement, which involved hundreds of people in Edenton, to desegregate public facilities such as the movie theater, stores, and restaurants in town. Over the next six years, Frinks spearheaded the struggle in Edenton to defeat the unjust practices of Jim Crow by using the tactics and strategies that would become his trademark. Through nonviolent acts of civil disobedience, such as sit-ins, protests, demonstrations, and marches (led mainly by young people), Frinks led dozens of communities throughout North Carolina toward freedom from the injustices of segregation and racial discrimination. In 1963 Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. personally selected Frinks to become a field secretary for the Southern Christian Leadership Conference (SCLC) in North Carolina, a position he held until 1977.

Golden Frinks’s unique style of activism wore down racist political practices, earning him the nickname “The Great Agitator.” He led more than a dozen movements for civil

rights for African Americans and American Indians throughout North Carolina, three of which rivaled well-known movements such as those in Birmingham and Montgomery, Alabama. The Hyde County School Boycott led to the desegregation of public schools and the preservation of historically black school buildings in that county. The Edenton, Williamston, Plymouth, and Greenville movements contributed to the desegregation of public facilities and the integration of public schools.

Frinks's activities were not limited to North Carolina. He worked with SCLC throughout the Southeast to fight for racial equality. He also spearheaded individual cases of alleged racial injustice, such as that of Joann Little, an African American woman accused of killing her jailer after he had assaulted her in a North Carolina prison during the early 1970s. In 1973 Frinks marched to the state capital of Raleigh along with the Tuscarora Indians to support their struggle to gain tribal recognition and representation on the Robeson County school board.

During a recent interview, Frinks shared what he thought was one of the most memorable things about those movements in Williamston, Edenton, and other counties in North Carolina.

*The change. Attitudinal change is one thing. Because once you have a couple of days with a community, community begins to understand. One thing about it, in all of my movements, I tried to keep the press with me. I never tried to push the press away. So that the news would get out, whether good or bad. And I would deal with it. That . . . change . . . the community would change, gradually, and get closer and closer. And I remember in Fuquay-Varina, a group stood back until the next morning . . . [because] they didn't understand. . . . The next morning they marched out of the town with us, you see.*

*First they didn't understand. But they stood back and watched, you know, and see what we were saying. . . . And the black church would open up. We would always find that one church [that] would open up. And then some of them would come to the church and then understand what we were doing, and then they would join in with us.*

Jailed eighty-seven times for his civil rights activities in North Carolina and throughout the Southeast, Golden Frinks remained a passionate advocate for racial justice during the course of his life. Frinks delivered a poignant speech in the late 1970s that included the passage below. (The entire speech has been recorded in a commemorative booklet titled *The Great Agitator: "We Shall Overcome Someday."*) In the passage, Frinks recalls the many turbulent and tragic incidents from the Civil Rights movement.

*I am here this midday with you—and should I say getting here was easy would be a [misnomer]—for I came the hard way. We as black people must never forget . . . On my way here I got gunned down in Georgia, I was bombed in Sunday school in Alabama, we were shot in the back in Mississippi, I came across the [Edmund Pettus] Bridge beaten and bleeding . . .*

*. . . I came by the funeral of Martin Luther King Jr., the body of Malcolm X, and the slain, limp body of John Kennedy. I came by tent cities, for poor people who only wanted to vote. . . . But more important I AM STILL COMING . . .*

*. . . I came by signs reading I AM A MAN. . . . But there lay bleeding in his front yard a Harry Lee Dickens . . . shot by a white minister's wife—I am a man and I AM STILL COMING . . .*

*. . . I came by a riot in Washington, D.C., and blacks laying dead in Watts, in California—because America passed them by because of their color—I AM STILL COMING . . .*

*I came by the fields of battles where our forefathers fought wars to make fast these truths that all men are created equal—I came holding high the hopes and dreams of America—ever ready to defend what some men have died for. We must be determined to live for, in the instance upon respect for these rights, not just for the weak, or the strong, but for the unpopular as well as the popular—the minority as well as the majority. . . . Asking that no special treatment I ask, we want as equal part to enjoy the fruits of America . . .*

*You America can no longer put down with authority . . . or jail those who have put their life on the line for freedom . . . I AM STILL COMING. . . .*

Among the hundreds who gathered on that rainy afternoon in late July 2004 to celebrate the life of this hero were Frinks's lifelong companion and wife, Mrs. Ruth Frinks; their daughter, Dr. Goldie Ann F. Wells; and a host of family and friends. One lasting reminder from Golden Frinks resonated throughout the reflections shared by numerous people who had labored tirelessly at his side: "Our struggle for civil rights is not over."

At the time of this article's publication, Shirl Spicer worked on the curatorial staff at the North Carolina Museum of History.