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Common Sense At The Lunch Counters

North Carolina is hearing widespread pleas for common sense in the outburst of Negro lunch counter protests from one end of the state to the other and beyond the borders.

Quite evidently common sense has been missing from the beginning of this episode and threatens to continue in the arrest of 41 Negro students for trespass at Raleigh's swank Cameron Village. Malcolm Seawell, the attorney general who talks too much, is lashing the American Civil Liberties Union and saying that his statements "with respect to the law in this state are none of your business."

Unfortunately, now that the arrests have been made, the case will become very much the business of outside federal courts of law, something North Carolina could well avoid in this time of turmoil. The question of just how private places of business which serve the public are may be well established among us Tar Heels.

But it is not equally clear that the U. S. Supreme Court will reach the same conclusion. This state has managed so far in episodes growing out of the Brown decision to keep the courts from breathing down our necks. We have done what we reluctantly deemed necessary, but with full awareness of the need for avoiding court orders and public disorders.

Now what is public and what is private about a commercial establishment will be a question for court decision, and that may stir up more racial snakes than it kills.

In the meantime the question of what the five-and-dime stores intend to do about their stand-up, sit-down patronage remains. To any Tar Heel with common sense the best answer would have been to clear the stores of three groups: customers anxious to be served, the press, TV and radio and sundry curiosity seekers. That policy would have been to serve the handful of Negro customers who first came and sent them on their way as rapidly as possible. This was not

done for a variety of reasons, some of them understandable.

But now that the issue still hangs over the individual stores and communities, creating dark clouds of uncertainty, the only sensible course is to find some way to serve all those customers who want to be served. It should be done if it means setting up little separate but equal areas as a start, or ripping out all the seats and letting everybody eat standing up or simply at some unannounced time initiating a policy of service for all.

The issue will not quiet down without a decision—either to cope with the moral question or to cease all food service. The variety chain stores would serve their own ends poorly elsewhere if they decided they couldn't find an accommodating answer in the South.

This means, then, that the leadership of North Carolina's assailed cities must assert itself. An effort must be made not to coerce Woolworth and Kress into a particular decision but simply to serve as mediators, to counsel and to help North Carolina dispose of this sometimes ridiculous controversy over where and how people have lunch.

We must emphasize, however, that if a positive decision is made, even one which does not completely satisfy all, the community must avoid all public demonstrations of victory or defeat. This situation must deal with individuals, not orderly demonstrators or mobs.

Greensboro, the city where the trouble first began, would do well to find an accommodation which might serve as a pattern for other communities. We have much wisdom in our municipal, educational and commercial leadership. Efforts already are under way to find an answer.

We trust that the community, both white and Negro, will co-operate to the fullest if, after much deliberation and consideration, a way is found to deal with this problem, as Mayor George Roach declared a week ago, with justice and honor.