

Chapter 10 Veterans Challenge the System

New ideas and high expectations followed many returning black World War II soldiers; some would challenge the state's culture and authority more than ever. The Civil Rights Movement would never involve all the people – but those who became its leaders - Amzie Moore of Cleveland, Aaron Henry of Clarksdale, and Medgar Evers of Decatur in east central Mississippi – would be long-remembered for their renewed challenge of the racist bullying of Mississippi whites.

Moore, Henry and Evers were part of nearly one million African Americans who fought in Europe and Asia. Their plan was to capture the freedom they had fought for and helped to win as soldiers.

Most returning southern white veterans did not agree. They had fought this war and expected to keep things the same, and not for any changes that would bring on integration. Robert 'Tut' Patterson of Clarksdale and Byron de la Beckwith of Greenwood, both World War II heroes who would take significant roles in reaction to the Civil Rights Movement, vehemently opposed any changes in the status of blacks, regardless of their military contributions.

These two white men like so many others believed World War II was fought to preserve their Southern way of life or status quo and was not fought for African American freedom and democracy. But during the ten years following the end of World War Two, Mississippians saw black activism slowly rise and expand through what some, including the FBI, loosely termed a *Mau Mau* or "uprising" that began with an accelerated fight for voter registration and voting rights and moved up to attacks on the state's segregated school systems and public places.

Some help came from the NAACP's Legal Defense fund and other groups, but this was mostly a homegrown movement that saw Mississippi and Delta blacks rise up and become uniquely powerful leaders.

During the war, black rarely were allowed to rise in military rank. They were often assigned the most menial, degrading, and hard-working jobs. The worst tragedy on record, stemming from such mistreatment, involved Mississippi Congressman John Rankin and occurred at Port Chicago, a naval ammunition base Northeast of San Francisco, the first pier in U. S. history built for loading and shipping explosives and munitions.

There, seventy-one white officers oversaw 1,400 black sailors, who loaded the ammunition in three round-the-clock seven-hour shifts. White officers had no experience in handling ammunition and ignored all the grievances reported by the black enlistees. A tragic explosion of ammunition took place on the morning of July 17, 1944 and 320 men were killed instantly - including 202 black enlisted men. Two hundred thirty-three black enlisted men were among the 390 injured, this disaster accounting for 15 percent of all black naval casualties during World War II.

The Navy found the cause to be "incompetence" on the part of the black seamen, letting the racist chain of command completely off the hook. Congress introduced a bill to grant the families of the dead \$5,000 compensation but Rankin objected. Congress blinked and reduced the amount to \$3,000."ⁱⁱ

AMZIE MOORE, EVEN before leaving Mississippi for World War II, was involved in race relations, once organizing a successful rally of 10,000 blacks in Cleveland. Born September 23, 1911, on the Wilkin plantation near the Grenada and Carroll County lines, Moore served over three and a half years in the Army before returning to his job at the U. S. Post Office in Cleveland of Bolivar County where he had worked since 1935.

As a soldier, Moore worked with an intelligence unit in Burma and was ordered to tell African American soldiers that conditions in the United States would be better when they returned. Moore knew better, having joined the NAACP while still in the service.ⁱⁱⁱ

Returning home, Moore learned that one black person was being killed every week in Mississippi; the NAACP attributed many of these deaths to a newly organized "home guard," patterned after a fanatic Delta white group formed during the Civil War.^{iv} When Leon McTatie's body was found in a Sunflower County Bayou in June of 1946, ^v Moore, investigating for the NAACP, found the man was whipped to death for "stealing a saddle," a crime that black witnesses said McTatie did not commit.

McTatie's wife saw her husband killed and three defendants confessed to the beating, but it took a grand jury less than ten minutes to release the accused slayers. This was just one example of the Mississippi justice Moore and other veterans returned to see.^{vi}

Black veterans were surprised to find German Prisoner of War camps spread throughout Mississippi, many in the Delta. Mississippi was “home” to all captured German officers.

POWs were often treated even better than the returning black veterans; there were complaints that white prisoners were served in restaurants that would not serve black veterans, for example. One POW camp was located in Merigold, to the North of Cleveland, while another camp was in downtown Drew, “at the later site of the A.W. James building.” Frances Kimbriel Showers, the daughter of an early Drew physician, wrote about the camp in a family history published in 1999 for the Drew Centennial:

Most of the prisoners were German. Many ... were allowed to paint houses for local homeowners. The only cost was [for] the paint. I have been told that for recreation there were dances for the prisoners. Some of the local girls took sandwiches and cookies and danced with the ‘inmates.’ One of the organizers for those parties was Miss Elvie Netterville. I remember hearing the prisoners singing late in the afternoon on Sundays. They sounded very beautiful.... Some of the songs were happy, but most were sad.^{vii}

Once Moore came home, he opened a gas station, beauty shop, and grocery store on Highway 61 that also served as headquarters for the area’s civil rights efforts; his gas station offered the only restrooms for black drivers between Memphis and Vicksburg. Moore’s house was used as a "revolving dormitory" and "safe house" for activists during the movement's voter-registration drives in the 1960s. Rev. Martin Luther King, Jr., Andrew Young, and John Lewis. Thurgood Marshall, Jesse Jackson and Medgar Evers were some of his guests.

Proud of his family roots, Moore liked to tell about his grandfather, a slave who lived to be 104. “He couldn't read or write, yet he accumulated more than a section of land and had [about] ... twenty thousand dollars ... saved when he died.” Left on his own at fourteen after his mother died in 1925, Moore completed high school but could not realize his dream of a college education. Through the rest of his life, he succeeded in becoming a self-educated person and was one of Mississippi’s most respected civil rights leaders.^{viii}

Civil Rights activist Charles Cobb, who later came into Mississippi for Freedom Summer and was responsible for writing the prospectus for the successful Freedom schools, saw Moore as a “remarkably strong” person who liked to tell stories, and was a “classic organizer” as well. “He had us move in and out of dangerous places, successfully and quietly.

“And he had these stories and you were never sure whether he was talking about now or whether he was talking about twenty or thirty years ago. He’d launch off into some – you’d be passing by some place and he’d launch off into some involved story, some horrible event, some lynching, or something like that. And you’d sort of not be sure if he was talking about something that, you know, happened last weekend or [in years past] – and he did it quite deliberately.”^{ix}

Using history as a weapon

When Professor James Loewen taught history at Tougaloo College near Jackson, he asked students what he thought to be a simple question: What is Reconstruction? All but one student agreed it was a period after the Civil War when blacks governed Southern states but were so recently out of slavery they “messed up” and whites had to take back control.

“Well, my heart sank,” the professor told a *Boston-Globe* reporter. “There were three misstatements. First, blacks never took over governments. Southern states always had white governors and almost all had white legislatures. Second, governments during Reconstruction didn't screw up. That's a myth. Mississippi had one of its best governments ever. Third, whites did take control, but it was because a coalition of white planters and racist Democrats acted against the interracial coalition that had been governing Mississippi.”^x

This prompted Loewen to take a hard look into high school history texts, “and sure enough, my students had learned their lessons. It was the books that were wrong.” After Loewen in 1975 co-wrote the first revisionist state history textbook in America, winning the Lillian Smith Award for “best nonfiction about the South,” he had to sue the state to make “Mississippi: Conflict and Change” available to public schools.

The textbook board found the book “contained too much black history, featured a photograph of a lynching, and gave too much attention to the recent past” according to the white majority on the rating committee. But in April 1980, *Loewen et al. v. Turnipseed et al.* resulted in a sweeping victory based on the First and Fourteenth Amendments. The experience made Loewen aware of history used as a weapon. “My students had been battered by history. Not just the fact of history ... but battered by history books [and] by what we say about the past.”^{xi}

AARON HENRY USED the GI bill at Tulane University to become a pharmacist before settling back in Clarksdale, just one county away from Amzie Moore. Born on the Flowers brothers’ plantation in 1922, about 20 miles east of Clarksdale in Coahoma County, Henry worked all day in the fields starting at a young age.

“It was work or starve or get run off the place, and the work was simpler than the uncertainty of the outside. Nobody ever asked how we felt. They would hear us singing about the heat and the work and the life, and they would turn and tell each other how happy we all were.”^{xii}

Tuskegee Institute was promoting trades of the hands at the time; Henry’s father learned cobbling through the institute’s course by mail. Eventually the Henrys moved to nearby Webb, where his father opened up a small shoe repair shop. His mother took a Tuskegee course in beauty culture and began to dress hair at home.

In Webb, there was a school for white children, but Henry had to attend the school for black children on a nearby plantation, held in a Baptist church with only two teachers responsible for all grades. Henry remembered the contrasts in schools, and later gave much of his time to school improvement issues.

When the Henrys moved to Clarksdale, Boy Scout officials once tried to organize a black Scout troop. But the white community shut them down. “Scouting meant cultural development, a step toward equality, and the Clarksdale whites felt we weren’t ready for it. The decision was made without consulting the Negro community – *they* were the authorities on our welfare.”^{xiii}

In school, Henry and his schoolmates were taught from well-worn state approved textbooks “that mentioned Negroes only as criminals, just enough to justify the Ku Klux Klan’s activity.” A new school principal, “soon in Dutch with the county board of education,” ensured that black history and literature were

included. For the first time, Henry and his schoolmates were learning in biology that blacks were not inferior. And a liberal arts education was supplementing the technical and agricultural work.

Drafted in 1943, Henry and his friend, Charles Hill, quickly learned the “only things not segregated [at Mississippi’s Camp Shelby] were the men in charge – they were always white, and ‘in charge’ was the operative term.”^{xiv} Military service for most black soldiers in Mississippi meant daily doses of abuse and humiliation. In camp, white soldiers often beat black soldiers.^{xv} Henry, throughout his entire period of service, searched out nearby NAACP chapters and became involved in civil rights activities.

Once discharged, Henry left for Tulane University in New Orleans where he was involved with an active chapter of the NAACP and also joined the National Students Association, eventually to become Students for a Democratic Society or SDS.

In 1950, when Henry returned home, he was “plagued by problems of police brutality, of rapes of black women by whites, and murders of blacks by whites, with no national organization to come to the rescue.”

Henry, R.L. Drew, H.Y. Hackett, Leola Guest, and several others decided to form an NAACP chapter; Ruby Hurley and Rev. Amos Holmes, the state’s NAACP president, came to Clarksdale in 1952 and helped organize the Clarksdale branch. Seven years later, Henry became the NAACP state president, heading the organization for over thirty years.^{xvi}

Like Moore’s service station business, Henry’s pharmacy became a civil rights headquarters for the Northern Delta. Henry led boycotts, demonstrations, and other civil rights activities, resulting in the bombing of his home and his drugstore and over thirty arrests.

MEDGAR EVERS was sixteen and a sophomore when World War II broke out. Within a year, he quit school and joined his brother Charles Evers in the U. S. Army. Medgar Evers was attached to a segregated battalion that served in England and, after the Normandy invasion, in France.

The experience opened up the world to him; the opportunity to leave the South and see new parts of the world provided an adventure he could not forget. In France, he found “a whole people – all of them white – who apparently saw no

difference in a man simply because of his skin color, and this was perhaps the greatest revelation of all,”^{xvii} he later told his wife, Myrlie.

While Evers grew up in Decatur Mississippi, outside of the Delta, he would spend several years in Mound Bayou of Bolivar County after finishing college on the GI Bill where he worked with Amzie Moore, organizing NAACP chapters and investigating murders, and was an insurance salesman. Evers would quickly come to know Aaron Henry as the three men began lifelong journeys to change Mississippi.

All returning black veterans – Moore, Henry and Evers – faced the Delta’s familiar extremes, both old and new. Politics had shifted further right; powerful behind-the-scenes players were building their own blocs, such as the Delta Council, a forerunner of what would become the Citizens Councils, a racist organization developed to fight change. A massive farming revolution, which would further marginalize Mississippi blacks because fewer would be “necessary” to pick the cotton, was also underway.

Usual conflicts between moneyed Delta whites and their poor counterparts in the nearby hill country had eased over the war years, fusing a new race-based voting bloc. Both groups, fearing federal intervention over race issues, had combined their votes, sending two outspoken, ultra conservative racists back to the United States Senate – Eastland and Bilbo. The practice of segregating primary elections, known as White Primaries, ended before the war was over, hence the black vote actually doubled in the 1947 election, but still represented only 10 percent of the African-Americans eligible to vote.^{xviii}

Some attempted to hurdle the racial barriers that kept blacks from voting and exercising other citizens’ rights. Few succeeded, since the segregationist culture was so strong. Chancery Judge Harvey Ross, born and raised in the New Africa district outside of Clarksdale, grew up in times when segregation was absolute. As a white child with more experience than most others around blacks, Ross early on observed the required conformities others lived by:

[T]he black school system was almost nonexistent ... there were scattered one-room schools around the county and these schools were always closed when it was time to chop cotton and when it was time to pick cotton... On the Eliza Clark School ground, where all of the swings and sliding boards and sand piles and wading pools were, black children were simply not allowed to set foot on that school ground. If a black child was walking to town from there, rather than walk across the

school ground, he had to walk all the way around; and this was religiously adhered to.^{xix}

With the War over, Harvey Ross and a small group of whites and African Americans tried to bring change to their community through weekly meetings in Clarksdale. The first meeting in the black county agent's office “was secretly set up because none of us had ever been to such a meeting where we were going to discuss race relations and what needed to be done to improve them. We were nervous about anybody knowing we participated in such a thing.”

In the first meeting, Aaron Henry told Joe Ellis, the local newspaper editor, he was bothered that blacks were never referred to as Mr. or Mrs., always just by their first names without courtesy titles. “I remember Joe Ellis says, ‘Well, I agree with you. That's not right and that'll be changed.’ But few changes actually occurred from any of these meetings, Ross admitted.^{xx}

ⁱ In the 1950s an uprising against British colonists and other settlers was conducted by a secret society of Africans called Mau Mau. Some parallels can be drawn with this Kenyan independence movement and that which took place in the Delta. European school children of the 1950's were taught only one version of the story that showed British soldiers winning over wild, bloodthirsty and cannibal black terrorists. Left out was the desperation of the Kikuyu people, their hunger, misery, illness, and the seizing of their farming lands to be colonized. After years of mistreatment a people that never warred rebelled in one of the most violent guerrilla uprisings in history, the Mau Mau.

ⁱⁱ Monica Moorehead, "The Port Chicago Mutiny," *Workers World*, February 23, 1995.

ⁱⁱⁱ Pete Daniel, "Lost in the Revolution: The South in the 1950s," (Urbana: University of North Carolina, 2000).

^{iv} When civil authority in many parts of the South had collapsed and assorted criminals were running loose through the countryside, counties still under Confederate control were directed to form home guard companies, composed of men and boys too old or too young for regular Confederate service, or who were otherwise exempt from the Conscript Law and their responsibilities included protection of persons and property.

^v Cobb, 213. Cites the *New York Times*, February 7, 1982; James A. Burran III, "Racial violence in the South During World War II (Ph.D. Diss., University of Tennessee, 1977), 263-65; Williams, "Mississippi and Civil Rights," 54. In some accounts the victim in the case is referred to as Leon "McAtee" rather than "McTatie."

^{vi} Cobb.

^{vii} Frances Kimbriel Showers, "Memories of Life in Drew," *Recollections*, (compiled for the *Drew Centennial*, September 23, 1999), 23.

^{viii} Oral history with Amzie Moore, University of Southern Mississippi Libraries and USM's Center for Oral History and Cultural Heritage. March 29 and April 13, 1977. The interviewer was Mike Garvey.

^{ix} Oral history with Charles Cobb, University of Southern Mississippi Libraries and The Center for Oral History and Cultural Heritage, October 21, 1996. Interviewer, John Rachal.

^x Jack Thomas, "A Textbook Case of Lying," *Boston Globe*, December 12, 1995, p. 75.

^{xi} Ibid.

^{xii} Aaron Henry and Constance Curry, "The Fire Ever Burning," (Jackson University Press of Mississippi, 2000), 3.

^{xiii} Ibid., 27.

^{xiv} Ibid., 58.

^{xv} The mistreatment of black soldiers has been well documented in oral histories, interviews, and other research. This writer's own father, a WWII veteran, recalled seeing a white officer with his hands around the neck of a black soldier, beating the soldier's head into a cement wall.

^{xvi} An oral history with Aaron Henry for the Lyndon B. Johnson Library, September 12 1970, interviewed by T.H. Baker.

^{xvii} Myrlie Evers, with William Peters, "For Us, The Living," (Jackson: University Press of Mississippi), 24-25.

^{xviii} Even in 1960, a full sixteen years beyond the Supreme Court's White Primary decision (*Smith v. Allright*), only 28 percent of the southern African-American electorate were registered. Most were not staying away from the polls out of personal choice.

^{xix} An Oral History with the Honorable Harvey Ross, USM Libraries and Center for Oral History and Cultural Heritage, December 1, 1994, interviewer Homer Hill.

^{xx} Ibid.