

Chapter 14 Bloody Belzoni

The small town of Belzoni, once called “Bloody Belzoni,” because of its notoriety over lynching and Saturday night gun fights, is set between Indianola and Yazoo City. But the days and nights of downtown gun fights appear to be over and scattered throughout the small business district of this town today are colorful statues of plastic catfish celebrating the city's self-acclaimed status of Catfish of the World.

At the Humphreys County courthouse, a block away from Main Street, are statues honoring veterans of WWI, WWII, and the Civil War. On the other side of town, in a poor and vandalized neighborhood, an impressive granite block has been solidly placed at the beginning of a city street with no words other than “Rev. George Lee” etched into the stone.

There are no words explaining who Rev. Lee was or why the memorial exists. Yet walk around the town and ask about Belzoni's history; and before long someone will tell the story of this minister and others who were brutalized and killed for simply trying to register and vote.

On May 7, 1955, Reverend George Washington Lee, the first black to register to vote in Humphreys County since Reconstruction, was shot to death on a neighborhood street while driving his car. Several witnesses saw a car drive by with white men inside, but the local sheriff ruled Rev. Lee had gotten in a fight with a woman and lost control of his car. The lead pellets found in his jaw tissues were “dental fillings, mysteriously dislodged in the accident.”

Lee and the second of the Belzoni Citizen Council's prime targets, Gus Courts, both lived and ran small grocery businesses in Belzoni. Lee often used his pulpit and his printing press to urge others to vote. White officials offered him protection on the condition he end his voter registration efforts, but Lee refused and was killed.

Courts, head of the town's new NAACP Chapter, was ordered by his banker to turn over all NAACP books. He refused and was warned to leave town. Earlier Courts was shown a list of ninety-five blacks registered in Humphreys County; a Citizens Council member instructed Courts that anyone not removing their name from the voting list would lose their jobs.¹

Both Courts and Reverend Lee were good friends and staunch members of the Regional Council of Negro Leadership. Each had worked for years to pay poll taxes so they could vote and were finally allowed to sign the register after the county sheriff feared federal prosecution. (Actually casting a ballot required a separate battle.)

The day Rev. Lee was killed, almost a year after *Brown*, Courts had visited Reverend Lee's store to talk about his business. Rev. Lee said he was about to lose his store because of Citizens Council pressure. The minister had received an earlier anonymous death threat demanding he remove his name from the voting list and as Courts left, Lee told his friend that he had a funny feeling, even though such threats by Council members were not uncommon.

That night as Reverend Lee drove his car along Belzoni's Church Street, returning from a Regional Council meeting at Mound Bayou, “two gun blasts shattered the night stillness, and the Buick sedan swerved

over the curb and rammed into a frame house. With the lower left side of his face gone, Rev. Lee staggered from the wreckage; he died during transportation to the Humphreys County Memorial Hospital.”ⁱⁱ

When Medgar Evers arrived in Belzoni to investigate, Sheriff Ike Shelton told him that Lee had lost control of his car and died from the crash; the lead pellets found in his jaw tissues were dental fillings. Initial newspaper accounts quickly picked up on the “mysteriousness” of the murder.

Evers was also told an autopsy was not necessary for the “freak accident.” Nevertheless, at Mrs. Lee’s insistence, two black physicians examined her husband’s body and reported the tissues contained pellets “fired at close range from a high-powered gun.” They also found powder burns.

Accompanied by two NAACP national staff members, over the next few days, Evers met with eyewitnesses and the story emerged: Lee was followed by three men in another car. His right rear tire was punctured by a rifle shot and as he slowed, the second car “pulled parallel and a shotgun was fired point-blank into his face. There were also descriptions of the three men, with tentative identifications.”ⁱⁱⁱ

Evers expressed doubts of any FBI investigation taking place, since there was never any public report “or even a solid rumor” as to what was in the report. “None was really expected by Mississippi’s Negroes who had come to regard the FBI as irrelevant at best, and as an ally of white supremacy at worst.” Ultimately, the sheriff concluded that Lee was murdered by another black in an argument over a woman, and no arrest was ever made.

The murder, in other words, was a cold-blooded answer to the demands for equal treatment coming from more Mississippi blacks and was backed by the lies of the sheriff and local police, Evers concluded.^{iv}

The NAACP tried to obtain help from the FBI, to no avail. Recalled Henry: “We felt we needed protection because the past had taught us that when one Negro is killed, stay out of town if your skin is black. And here we were having a memorial service right in the middle of town.

“For one of the first times, no protection was needed – there wasn’t a white man on the streets the day of the service, except for the press. There was a great turnout of Negroes for the funeral. This large presence of Negroes and absence of whites marked a turning point.”^v

During the service, the Citizens Council was directly blamed for Lee’s murder by the state NAACP president, Dr. A.H. McCoy. Roy Wilkins, national head of the NAACP, said such violence would not deter blacks from their goal.

The Citizens Council later responded with a statement that the Council had nothing to do with Lee’s death because violence was against the group’s constitution and bylaws. No one was tried for the murder, despite the attempt by Evers and others to open an investigation.^{vi} After Reverend Lee’s murder, a “death list” that appeared in a Delta newspaper was taken more seriously by the NAACP and others.

The full-page ad attacked nine black leaders by name and the Citizens Council chapters passed around copies at meetings. The Rev. George Lee’s name was on it, and so was Medgar Evers’.

As it turned out, the FBI did investigate the Lee murder and records show the agency built a circumstantial murder case against two men, but a local prosecutor refused to take the case to a grand jury. Peck Ray and Joe David Watson Sr., the suspects, were members of the Citizens Council. Both died in the 1970s.^{vii}

Interviewed by *Newsday* years later in 2000, Ernest White, a close friend of Lee's, said that he always suspected that Ray, a local handyman, and Watson, a gravel hauler, were involved in Lee's murder. "We suspected them because of their reputation," White told reporter Stephanie Saul. Before Lee's murder, Watson had been arrested, but not convicted, for randomly shooting into a black sharecropper's home.

Some of Lee's friends believed the murder was part of a larger conspiracy involving influential members of the community who wanted to silence Lee, who was encouraging blacks to register to vote. "The big wheels paid them off," said White, who became a city councilman years after Lee's death.^{viii}

The FBI released their investigation records to *Newsday* under the Freedom of Information Act. Many names in the records were marked out but reveal the FBI had named Watson and Ray:

"Witnesses saw two men leave a downtown street corner where they had been standing, enter Ray's green two-toned Mercury convertible just before the shooting, drive away and return shortly afterward. Several witnesses saw a convertible fitting that description following Lee with only its parking lights on. One witness said the fatal shots were fired from such a car. But no one could identify the shooters."

The report also indicated that Ray had his convertible painted red following the shooting and that Watson's pick-up had carried a sawed-off shotgun loaded with No. 3 buckshot – the same bullets used to kill Lee. Further, Watson and Ray gave conflicting accounts of their activities that night.

Ray's wife told investigators that he had picked her up from the movie at about 11 p.m. and had gone home. But she could not remember the name of the movie. Ray's daughter, Doris Dalton, told Saul she did not believe her father could have committed such a crime and that it was her idea to paint the convertible because she was taking it to college.

Agents had turned over evidence to the local prosecutor, Stanny Sanders, but held Watson's shotgun and shells for possible use in a trial. Sanders, who died in 1972, declined to prosecute. An FBI memo in 1956 states that Sanders believed that while the investigation "conclusively demonstrates that criminal action was responsible for Lee's death, he does not believe the identity of the subjects is sufficiently established by usable evidence to warrant presentation to the grand jury." Sanders told agents that a Humphreys County grand jury "probably would not bring an indictment, even if given positive evidence."

Sanders suggested that Belzoni settled down after Lee's murder, and he believed it would harm race relations to reopen the matter. The U. S. Justice Department did not file civil rights charges because it could not substantiate allegations that Lee was killed because of voting rights activities. "The 20-gauge double-barrel shotgun was personally returned to Watson by an FBI agent, the file notes. Also delivered were the two No. 3 buckshot shells obtained ... with the gun."

That fall, political campaigns were negative, condemning voting initiatives and school desegregation efforts. The Citizens Council supported all five candidates for governor; and the state Democratic Party chair, Bidwell Adams, announced that blacks might be national Democrats, but they were not Mississippi Democrats. "We don't intend to have Negroes voting in this primary," Adams said.^{ix} Few blacks would have supported any of the gubernatorial candidates, anyway, Aaron Henry later observed.

Shortly after Rev. Lee's murder the Supreme Court handed down *Brown II* on May 31, 1955, ordering the South to proceed with integration "with all deliberate speed." The wording seemed harsh to many, as *Brown II* spoke plainly in reaffirming the first decision.^x

This time anger was higher than before and chaos reigned in many communities throughout the South, including the Delta. Three weeks later, the NAACP in Vicksburg filed a petition signed by 140 parents calling for “immediate steps to reorganize the public schools on a non-segregated basis.”

The following week in Natchez, seventy-five parents filed a similar petition. Parents followed suit in Jackson and then within weeks, Delta parents in Clarksdale and Yazoo City joined the growing movement.^{xi} It was a real act of courage for any parent to sign a petition, and Evers insisted that people know what they were signing and all possible consequences, Myrlie Evers said.

Parents were also assured they could remove their names if pressures became too great. Black teachers were holding back in their support, afraid they would lose their jobs if identified with the movement. Further, a problem existed for most black teachers because of their own inferior training. Few had advanced degrees or schooling outside of Mississippi. Some had no degree at all, and many black teachers soon lost their jobs.

Most school boards simply closed the matter, saying the petitions failed to meet certain requirements and presented them with nothing to take action upon. This advice, at least in Vicksburg, came from the state’s attorney general. But white Citizens Councils did not see the situation as closed. New chapters quickly formed and in Yazoo City, the names, addresses, and telephone numbers of petitioners were listed in a paid advertisement in the *Yazoo Herald* as a “public service” of the Citizens Council of Yazoo City.^{xii}

Myrlie Evers told how the toll of petitioners in Yazoo City quickly overcame any possibilities of change: “Jasper Mims, treasurer of the local NAACP, had been a carpenter for thirty years. He had earned up to \$150 a week. Months later he reported he had not had a call for work since the now-famous ad had appeared.

“The income of Hoover Harvey, a plumber whose customers were mostly white, was soon down to twenty dollars a week. Both Mims and Harvey removed their names from the petition, but there was no letup in the pressure.”^{xiii}

Fifty-one of the fifty-three signatures on the petition were removed; two people who left the county for good didn’t stop to have their names taken from the list, and this was the story in most towns where the petitions were filed. Evers drove from city to city, speaking at meetings and asking petitioners to hold firm.

But this was not to be, and the Jackson NAACP soon became a distribution point for food and clothing as petitioners around the state suffered. People told the NAACP they received threatening telephone calls or were put off their plantations; and they were having police, money, voting, and even marital problems.

The growing violence was not limited to the Delta. Lamar Smith was killed on a Saturday morning, August 13, 1955, in Brookhaven. The sixty-year-old farmer and World War II veteran was handing out voting literature to blacks on the Lincoln County Courthouse lawn, in the home county of Judge Brady, author of *Black Monday*, when he was shot by a white man in broad daylight who was never officially identified although dozens of people watched the killing. No one would admit they saw a white man shoot a black man

Smith, who had voted in the primary election eleven days earlier, was explaining to blacks how to vote by absentee ballot to avoid violence at the polls. He may have also been campaigning against a county supervisor. The NAACP later blamed Citizens Councils for the murder in a pamphlet entitled *M is for Murder and Mississippi*.

Even though the murder occurred on Saturday morning when the courthouse square was normally filled with people, investigators said there were no witnesses to be found. In *Local People*, historian John Dittmer

wrote, “Although the sheriff saw a white man leaving the scene 'with blood all over him,' no one admitted to having witnessed the shooting,” and “the killer went free.” Later, a white farmer, Noah Smith, was charged with murder in a warrant filed by J. J. Breland, a “courageous attorney.”^{xiv}

Between the years of 1956 and 1959, Evers spent much of his time investigating racially motivated homicides. Officially, ten blacks were killed by whites in civil rights struggles in those years, and there were no convictions. Evers’ job was to investigate, file complaints, issue angry statements, take reporters to crime scenes, issue press releases, and involve the federal government.^{xv}

One Saturday morning in Belzoni

He is almost 80 years old and appears more fragile than she. He slowly rakes leaves from a pecan tree into neat piles while she sweeps away all the stuff that has blown onto the gray and white-painted porch. It is a warmish January day in this Yazoo-Mississippi Delta town, unusual for winter, and the couple soaks in these extra moments of sun.

Their home is elegant and is set on a tree-lined street; painted white with a smoke-colored oval glass positioned into the handsome wood-carved door. They have lived in this house for just three years. “We moved from over there,” she says, pointing south-west, across town.

He stops raking and looks over to an older, more traditional home with a traditional Southern veranda in front and four statuesque columns. “That was the planter’s home when we sharecropped. You ever heard of him? They would have watched us talking, you know.

“You wouldn’t be allowed to come over here and visit, not even on our porch. There would be trouble if you did. See, it was against the law, then,” he says.

They remember their friend Rev. George Lee who was murdered in Belzoni back in 1955 and agree to tell a stranger about him. “He was a big man and he spoke so beautifully. He didn’t do all of that walking around like some do when he preached. He just stood there at the pulpit and spoke to us with love. His daddy was a preacher, too,” she remembers.

“The day Rev. Lee was murdered, I had just come home from downtown when someone from the church came and told me he’d been shot and was dead. It was a horrible thing.”

Her husband looks down for a moment and then goes back to raking leaves. And she returns to her sweeping.

ⁱ Henry, 93.

ⁱⁱ Myrlie Evers, 155. Another version of this story by some Delta blacks is that Rev. Lee told his wife that he needed to close the store early and go to the dry cleaners to pick up a suit that he meant to wear the next day. Mrs. Lee later believed that Rev. Lee left home to avoid having her become a victim of his assailants. While driving down a street not far from his home, a shotgun blast ripped through the car. Rev. Lee lost control of the car and crashed onto the porch of a lady who, at first, claimed that she saw the car of the assailants ... she later changed her mind and said she saw nothing.

ⁱⁱⁱ Ibid., 156-157.

^{iv} Ibid., 159.

^v Henry, 94.

^{vi} Henry, 94.

^{vii} Stephanie Saul, "FBI Files Detail '55 Slaying," *Newsday*, May 9, 2000.

^{viii} Ibid.

^{ix} Henry, 94.

^x Patterson, 84.

^{xi} Myrlie Evers, 164.

^{xii} Ibid.

^{xiii} Ibid.

^{xiv} Myrlie Evers, 169 – 170.

^{xv} Dittmer, 81. Cites Myrlie Evers.