

## Chapter 17 Surviving Mississippi

“In the 1960s, Mississippi was America at its worst – the hatred, the secrecy, the repression. The deadliest place in the United States: if you were a black person seeking to exercise your fundamental human rights, or a civil rights worker there to lend your hand. People died and people disappeared. The names of 40 martyrs are inscribed on the national Civil Rights Memorial in Montgomery, Ala.; 19 died in Mississippi. It was an American police state, something out of Chile or Argentina or East Germany. Our own magnolia-scented version of apartheid South Africa.” Paul Hendrickson, *The Washington Post*

**A**fter *Brown* and *Brown II* followed by the murders of Rev. Lee, Emmett Till and others, Mississippi’s racism was receiving increased world attention, as audiences could see on television and in news films the bizarre system that protected perpetrators and persecuted victims. It was common for Mississippians to shift blame for what they perceived as serious crimes to “Communists, outside agitators, race mixers, bums, druggies, and integrationists” in their assessment of the social changes they believed were being foisted upon them. Senator Eastland stayed out in front of the blame-spreading:

“Survival is the Issue,” was title of an editorial for a 1964 issue of *The Citizen*, published by the Citizens Councils, featuring a typical Eastland quote: “The state of Mississippi has been subjected to an invasion which the Communists regard as only the opening maneuver in the coming Negro revolution.”

As Dr. Martin Luther King was leading the Montgomery bus boycott, a Citizens Council rally was held in the city’s coliseum that attracted 10,000 anti-boycott whites. Eastland, the main speaker, told the crowd:

When in the course of human events it becomes necessary to abolish the Negro race, proper methods should be used. Among these are guns, bows and arrows, slingshots and knives.... All whites are created equal with certain rights, among these are life, liberty and the pursuit of dead niggers.<sup>i</sup>

Dorothy Day, founder of the Catholic Worker movement and long time advocate of the poor, visited Amzie Moore in Bolivar County in the midst of reaction to *Brown* and expressed concert about the plight of the county’s blacks; she had just learned that 240 families on the R.M. Dokins plantation of 20,000 acres would have to leave by the following year, due to agricultural mechanization. Scores of plantations in Tallahatchie, Sunflower, Bolivar and other counties were removing thousands of blacks as well.

During her Delta visit, Day ran into twenty editors from New England who were being “wined and dined” by the State Sovereignty Commission to encourage a better “understanding” of the state and its “need” for segregation She questioned whether the editors were seeing “all” of Mississippi:

[W]e ponder what impression these editors were able to take away after their week of wining and dining, boat rides on the Mississippi, fishing in the Gulf, tours of plantations.... There were a few who were speaking out and complaining that they were not seeing all.

But they did take their guests to Mound Bayou where Negroes spoke out, one saying, "life is dear, but so are other things," intimating that they were risking not only their security but life itself by speaking out. The Negro feels that there is truly a reign of terror being instigated throughout the South. Not only since the Emmett Till case, not only since the Supreme Court decision.... White Citizens Councils are being formed in every area and threats are in the air.

The simple fact is that the Negro outnumbers the white in these rich areas by five to one. Here are some figures. Bolivar county, white 19,000, colored 42,000 round figures; Sunflower whites, 17,000, colored 38,000; Tunica, whites 3,000, colored 17,000. No wonder the White Citizens Councils, the successor to the Klan, plans to drive out 500,000 Negroes in the next ten years, and drive out the Negro leaders first of all. No wonder they are afraid, as the exploiter has always been afraid, as the guilty has always been afraid, afraid of those whom he has starved and ill treated....

Those who remain are being tried as if by fire.... Although there have been other murders since the Till case, and men are afraid, still the white Mississippian knows that the eyes of the world are on Mississippi, that state of 986,000 Negroes by the 1950 census, where there are only 8000 registered [black] voters, and where they too are disqualified at every election, in one way or another.<sup>ii</sup>

AT THE TURN of the decade, as terror bounded throughout the South, a 26-year-old high school math teacher from Harlem, New York decided to turn his life around. Robert Moses saw a newspaper photo of the Greensboro, North Carolina sit-inners, and came to his own personal decision about the role he would play in the Civil Rights Movement.

The photo was of four freshmen at a black college in Greensboro who on February 1, 1960, decided to sit at the Woolworth's lunch counter downtown, where only whites ate. "They had a certain look on their faces, sort of sullen, angry, and determined. The Negro in the South had always looked on the defensive, cringing. This time they were taking the initiative. They were kids my age, and I knew this had something to do with my own life," Moses told historian Howard Zinn.<sup>iii</sup>

Many sit-inners experienced violence. But the idea took hold and in the next year, more than fifty thousand people, mostly black, some white, took part in demonstrations of one kind or another in a hundred cities. Over 3,600 of these demonstrators went to jail, yet by the end of 1960, some lunch counters were open to blacks in Greensboro and other places as well, but not in Jackson, Miss.<sup>iv</sup> That would come later.

In May 1961, a year after the Greensboro sit-ins, a group of black and white college students who became known as Freedom Riders set out from Washington to New Orleans to test a Supreme Court ruling banning racial segregation on interstate public transportation.

Black Riders tried to use white waiting rooms and bathrooms, while whites tried to use facilities set aside for blacks at segregated bus stations. National attention rose and hundreds joined the campaign as the Riders were beaten and arrested along the way.

"People were on fire. They wanted to change things and they did," said Ed Blankenheim who rode on a Greyhound bus that was firebombed in Anniston, Alabama: "It was the freedom ride notion itself — riding for freedom — that changed the Civil Rights Movement."<sup>v</sup>

The Riders knew their bus could be dynamited as they passed through dense forests near Meridian on May 24, 1961. As police cleared traffic along U. S. Highway 80, the caravan ran through stoplights at high speed to reach the edge of Jackson just before 2 p.m. where local police were waiting to lead a convoy to the Trailways bus station.

Once off the bus, several Riders headed for the rest rooms, ignoring commands to move on. Twelve Freedom Riders were first arrested – eleven blacks and one white – and charged with breach of the peace.

Riding on a second bus was James Leonard Farmer, the founder and national director of the Congress of Racial Equality (CORE). Farmer, who grew up in Holly Springs where his minister father taught theology at Rust College, had tested a Supreme Court decision fourteen years earlier outlawing segregated seating on interstate carriers by sending a group of riders across the upper South. This time, he was helping to test the Deep South and would spend 40 days in Mississippi jails as a result.

Freedom Riders in the original two buses experienced little resistance in Virginia. That changed once they were in Alabama. The second bus, making its way to Birmingham, was met with white men swinging baseball bats and chains. The men were allowed to beat up the Freedom Riders for fifteen minutes before police arrived and several riders were seriously injured. Buses were set on fire as FBI agents watched and took notes.

There had been no plans originally to enter Mississippi until several SNCC members learned CORE leaders had decided to stop the rides due to the Alabama violence. Students from Nashville were recruited by SNCC to continue the trip through Alabama and Mississippi.

Knowing their state was next, Mississippi's Governor Ross Barnett and the Citizens Councils strategized how they might deal with the Freedom Riders: They could intercept the buses, an act certain to anger the federal government. Or they could take the Freedom Riders to the state mental hospital and leave them there.

U. S. Attorney General Robert F. Kennedy stayed in contact with Senator Eastland, using him to help negotiate a deal with Barnett. It was decided there would be one bus, the Riders would arrive safely into Jackson, post bond after their arrest, and everything would return to normal.<sup>vi</sup>

Kennedy and his brother, President John F. Kennedy, could have provided federal protection for the Freedom Riders in Mississippi, since the U. S. Supreme Court had already outlawed segregated waiting rooms. But they stayed in the background, the apparent Kennedy policy for most Mississippi civil rights activities from then on.

When Farmer and fifteen other Freedom Riders arrived in Jackson, they were arrested and taken to jail. White mobs were kept away and the Riders were at first treated with civility. Robert Kennedy praised Mississippi officials for their response and called for civil rights activists to halt the rides for a cooling-off period.

Farmer responded that black Americans had been “cooling off for a hundred years” and would be “in a deep freeze” if they cooled off much more. The CORE leader told his national office to “keep Freedom Riders coming into Jackson as fast as possible on every bus, every train” in order to fill Mississippi’s jails.<sup>vii</sup>

Two days later, the first group of Riders came to trial and all were found guilty of breach of the peace. When the Freedom Riders appeared before Jackson Municipal Judge James L. Spencer (reportedly a member of the white Citizens Council), the judge opened court by apologizing to the all-white jury “for taking your time” and assuring the jurors he would do everything he could to get the trial over with swiftly.

With only five minutes deliberation, the jury brought in a verdict of guilty. Riders were fined \$200 and given sixty-day suspended sentences; they refused to admit guilt by paying the fine and did not post bail.

Most, including Farmer, chose to remain in jail for the maximum thirty-nine days they could serve and still appeal the convictions. More buses were headed to Jackson with Freedom Riders intending to fill the jails of Mississippi, making segregationist practices “so expensive and inconvenient as to become unfeasible.”

Often, blacks and white “agitators” were forced to face these kinds of situations without a lawyer, since there were few white lawyers in the entire state who would defend anyone involved in a civil rights arrest. Getting a black lawyer in Mississippi was not easy – only four were practicing full time in the entire state in the early 1960s, and they were frequently subjected to harassment in civil rights cases:

Black attorney R. Jess Brown who represented Riders had previously come within a few hours of being lynched along with his client Mack Charles Parker, accused of raping a white woman in 1959.

Black attorney Jack Young also represented Freedom Riders in court. White Mississippi lawyer William Higgs tried helping black lawyers in planning strategy for integrationist defendants; Higgs eventually filed suit against the State to halt tax money from being paid to the Citizens Councils through the Sovereignty Commission and soon became its target.<sup>viii</sup>

### *A question of balance...*

“The strange paradox of Mississippi is that the whites are not free. They have, in the words of Reverend King, ‘built a prison around themselves,’ and they are as much captive of the Mississippi system as the Negroes.

Simply stated, there exists what one Mississippian calls ‘a fog of fear’ that prevents most whites from voicing anything but rabid segregationist views. I heard one Negro student say half joking to a white classmate at Tougaloo: ‘After we get free, we’re going to free you.’”

Robert Kennedy knew he had not resolved the crisis by forming an agreement with Barnett and finally petitioned the Interstate Commerce Commission to issue a ruling to halt bus and railroad companies from using segregated terminals, following a suggestion of Dr. Martin Luther King. But as the ICC deliberated, Riders kept pouring into Mississippi and by summer's end, 328 riders had been arrested – half black.

Some 36 black Mississippians, including six women, were arrested in late June and early July at Jackson's Trailways, Greyhound and Illinois Central stations, ranging from 14-year-old Hezekiah Watkins and 30 other teenagers to five Riders in their twenties. Also, in July, about a dozen other Jackson young people were arrested at Walgreen's store and Livingston Park for violating segregation laws, according to Sovereignty Committee records.<sup>x</sup>

At first, the Riders were jailed in Jackson but in early June, they were moved to the county prison farm where the Rev. C.T. Vivian was beaten with a blackjack by police interrogators. Prisoners were transferred back to the Jackson jail after one Rider, released on bond, demanded an FBI investigation of the incident.

About two weeks later,<sup>xi</sup> with city and county jails overflowing, Barnett took the next step by sending Freedom Riders to the Delta's infamous Parchman prison. Located in Sunflower County of the Delta, on Highway 49 between the towns of Tutwiler and Drew, Parchman was reserved for Mississippi's "most hardened criminals." Several of the Jackson Freedom Riders were among those who spent nearly six weeks in Parchman.

The move came in the middle of the night. Riders were "piled into black marias and sent hurtling across the eastern flats of the Delta along Highway 49." (Not all were transferred in that manner. John Lewis would never forget being loaded into the back of a huge truck, "...just like we're cattle...not even human beings.)<sup>xii</sup> There had been no forewarning of the move and "the long ride into the dark emptiness of the Mississippi countryside – through sleeping hamlets with names like Louise, Hard Cash, Midnight, Sunflower, and Indianola – was frightening, especially for black riders."<sup>xiii</sup> The Freedom Riders worked through their initial fears by singing:

*Stand up and rejoice,*

*A great day is here.*

*We're riding for freedom*

*And the vic'try is near.*

Arriving at Parchman, males were forced to strip in the open air. When two of the men went limp, acting in passive resistance, a guard used a cattle prod to assault them. Fed a diet of molasses, biscuits, and watery coffee, the prison's newest inmates sang freedom songs from their cells to pass the time; the loudest voice belonged to "a thin young man named Stokely Carmichael from Harvard." When the guards demanded they stop their singing, the prisoners refused. As punishment, the guards took away their mattresses and blankets.

Nights were cold as they were forced to sleep on the cold, hard floor with windows opened wide as huge ventilation fans ran. Some were hosed down beforehand. One night, screens were removed from the cell windows letting the large Delta mosquitoes and other bugs inside. Later the screens were returned, and the

Riders were drenched with insecticide. During the day, windows were closed, subjecting the prisoners to the scalding, humid summer heat of the Delta.

Scattered hunger strikes physically weakened many of the Freedom Riders. One woman's asthma medicine was taken from her. In the adjacent cell, a woman prisoner miscarried while a prison employee watched, refusing to summon help. Morale began to erode under the adverse conditions, and debates took place about whether the Riders should fast or not.<sup>xiv</sup> Freedom Rider Stephen Green kept a diary on day-to-day survival at Parchman:

Some of our number refused to leave their cells on shower night. We all refused to "quiet down" in the evening, and entertained the warders with protest songs. Others went on hunger strikes. The response to this was sometimes physical beatings, but more often we received collective punishment. The food was periodically salted to the point that it was inedible. Those small, high windows on the hallway wall would be closed in the heat of the day and the air conditioning turned off. At night, the air conditioning would be turned up to maximum...

Occasionally, a particularly non-cooperative prisoner was taken from his cell and sent to the "hole" for one or even several days. This was a 6'x 6' metal box in the ward's basement with no light, no food and an open hole in the floor for defecation.... One of the Freedom Riders was a large black man who was a lead singer with the San Francisco Opera Company. For his sins one day, he was sent to the "hole", where he quickly discovered that the metal walls of his box made a perfect reverberator. That evening, as we began our usual sing-along of protest songs, there arose from the bowels of the Parchman Prison maximum security unit the notes of a beautiful spiritual. The volume was incredible — his deep baritone could be clearly heard in every room of the building.... In silence, with tears of joy in some eyes and rage in others, we listened to the most moving concert I have ever heard, to this day.

With the publicity surrounding the Freedom Rides, the prison could not starve or beat him sufficiently to quiet him, so he was returned to his cell. Not long after that, we were moved out of maximum security.<sup>xv</sup>

Five months after the first Freedom Riders left on their historic ride, the Interstate Commerce Commission (ICC) finally issued a Federal order banning segregation at all interstate public facilities based on "race, color or creed." The law became effective November 1st, 1961.

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<sup>i</sup> David B. Cooper, "An Ugly American Portrait: The South in 1948," *Knight Ridder/Tribune News Service*, December 19, 2002.

<sup>ii</sup> Dorothy Day, "On Pilgrimage - November 1956," *The Catholic Worker*, November 1956, 6, 8.

<sup>iii</sup> Zinn, 444.

<sup>iv</sup> On May 23, 1963, Anne Moody, John Salter, and Joan Trumpauer participated in a sit in at Jackson, Mississippi lunch counter. A crowd of white teenagers sprayed the demonstrators with mustard, catsup, and sugar, and one white man beat Salter on the back of

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the head several times. Joan was picked up and escorted out of the lunchroom. As the others left, Anne, John and Joan were picked up by Dr. King and taken to the NAACP headquarters.

<sup>v</sup> Deborah Bulkeley, Associated Press, "Fall reunion planned for rights activists," *The Clarion-Ledger*, June 25, 2001.

<sup>vi</sup> Dittmer, 93. Cites *New Orleans-Times Picayune*, June 11, 1961.

<sup>vii</sup> Dittmer, 95. Cites *New York Times*, May 25, 1961.

<sup>viii</sup> R. Jess Brown also risked his life by being the only Mississippi attorney of record for James Meredith. In 1962, William Higgs assisted with the filing of James Meredith's various lawsuits against the University of Mississippi and the State; later he took the case of a black youth seeking admission to Ole Miss, and also helped fund the *Mississippi Free Press*. In early 1963, Higgs was "made the victim of an elaborate morals charge frame-up, accused of making sexual advances on a teenage boy. He left Mississippi, telling friends he feared for his life, before being convicted in absentia by an all-white jury and disbarred from practicing law in the state." See Seth Cagin and Philip Dray, "We Are Not Afraid," (New York: Bantam Books, 1988), 252.

<sup>ix</sup> "Behind the Cotton Curtain" (online version). An anonymous transcribed 41-page document about racism in Mississippi during the 1960s. Written in 1964. Part of the Joseph and Nancy Ellin Freedom Summer Collection, Box 1, Folder 12, The University of Southern Mississippi, McCain Library and Archives, 9.

<sup>x</sup> Mississippi State Sovereignty Commission file(s) SCR ID # 2-140-3-45-1-1-1; SCR ID # 2-55-5-57-2-1-1; SCR ID # 2-55-5-74-2-1-1; SCR ID # 2-55-5-76-2-1-1.

<sup>xi</sup> Stephen Green, "Narrative: Freedom Rider Diary: Forty Years Later," Veterans of the Civil Rights Movement, (online crmvet.org).

<sup>xii</sup> Halbersham (The Children), 345.

<sup>xiii</sup> Cagin & Dray, 155.

<sup>xiv</sup> Descriptions of the Parchman experience were compiled from accounts included in books by Dittmer, Cagin & Dray, from some newspaper articles, and from various diaries on the website maintained by Veterans of the Civil Rights Movement. Apparently little changed at Parchman at least by September 4, 2000, when an international group of individuals from six countries, including Germany and the U.K., announced formation of an organization to protest the inhumane conditions at the Parchman state penitentiary. The group, ICHIP or International Citizens for Humane Incarceration at Parchman expressed its concerns to Mississippi Department of Correction Commissioner Robert Johnson in a letter describing "such deplorable conditions as insect and rodent infested cells, lack of proper medical and dental care, persistent flooding of feces and urine in cells and hallways, and lack of exercise - many inmates in Parchman have had no outside recreation in nearly a year." ICHIP members requested a tour the prison with members of the local press and Amnesty International attending. The most recent abuse at the time, said ICHIP member Betsy Wolfenden, an attorney from North Carolina, was that the prison was "... systematically removing all electrical outlets from the cells on Unit 32 of the prison which houses approximately 1,000 inmates." Previously the prisoners were allowed to purchase fans from the prison commissary. Without outlets to plug in the fans, the prisoners [were being] left to swelter in 6 x 9 cells for 24 hours a day without any relief from the 100 degree temperatures." Wolfenden said ICHIP members were hearing "frightening reports on a daily basis from prisoners who were unable to tolerate the extreme heat." According to the September 4, 2000, ICHIP news release: "[Due to] ... the unbearable temperatures within the cells, a number of prisoners on Unit 32-C at Parchman resorted to a hunger strike until Warden W. L. Holman responded to their concerns. "When Holman refused to meet with the prisoners, some of the inmates flooded their cells by allowing their toilets to overflow. One of the non-violent protestors was removed from his cell, pepper sprayed and beaten, and then thrown into 'the hole' for eight days, according to first-hand reports coming out of the prison." According to the release, the American Correctional Association suggests summertime temperatures inside prisons should range from 66 to 80 degrees F. According to Wolfenden, in a later telephone interview on March 20, 2005, ICHIP did not get far - "The Commissioner did not respond to our request." But the North Carolina attorney said she feels like ICHIP did make a difference, particularly after learning there had been related follow-up at Parchman by the ACLU. In the 2000 press release, she had stated "The citizens of Mississippi should be ashamed that their tax dollars are supporting a facility where a stray dog wouldn't be housed overnight, let alone human beings serving lengthy prison sentences. Being removed from society is the punishment. Enduring degradation and human rights abuses on a daily basis that violate the Eighth Amendment is not supposed to be the punishment."

<sup>xv</sup> Green.