

Chapter 34 A Place in Time

“[Cleve McDowell] has a place in history. I thought he was a person who felt that he had paid his dues and one who knew that he made quite a few sacrifices to try to achieve equality for everybody. He stood up when it was crucial.” *Constance Slaughter-Harvey, Esq.*ⁱ

Cleve McDowell’s body was discovered in his home by his sister, his office manager, and a Drew police officer. McDowell’s sister was checking on her brother who did not call her the night before on the telephone, as was his custom, and said she was concerned when she noticed the front door ajar. She called Nettie Davis, the officer, and together the three found him upstairs in his dressing room, leaned up against the wall naked and covered with a comforter. “It didn’t make sense.”

The city’s police chief quickly came to the scene, and according to several witnesses, including McDowell’s office manager, Nettie Davis, “he told us all to leave the house, including the police officer, and he stayed in the house for a long time, tearing up the floors and walls – like he was looking for something. He walked out with a small sack, but I don’t know what he had. It was obvious that he messed up the crime scene before the state investigators could get there.”

“About 20 minutes” after the police chief’s departure, Sunflower County Circuit Judge Gray Evans filed an order to seal the premises of McDowell’s residence making discussions of “any findings or evidence from the crime scene” illegal for any officers and personnel working the crime scene.

The same gag order “remains in effect,” even though the investigation was closed years ago, insisted the Sunflower County assistant district attorney who in the fall of 2003 refused access to any of the police investigation or court records stored in the courthouse basement in Indianola, even though the gag order never covered court officers.ⁱⁱ “The family would have to approve first,” stated a Sunflower County judge upon receiving a request by this author for McDowell’s records. Webb’s case files kept in the courthouse were accessible however, and indicated the following:

- An autopsy performed in Jackson that night by Steven T. Hayne, M.D., the state’s deputy coroner, indicated “negative” signs of any drug abuse.
- Cause of death was given as a “gunshot wound of the left neck, distant and perforating.”
- The death was listed as a homicide.
- Three gunshot wounds fired in “close temporal proximity” but not at close range, perhaps up to a distance of 15 feet, were described by the coroner: a “nonlethal” wound consisting of a “nonlethal distant and perforating gunshot wound of the left back,” a “nonlethal distant and perforating gunshot of the left shoulder with re-entry penetrating gunshot wound of the left temple” and a “lethal distant and perforating gunshot wound of the left neck.” These descriptions could not be put into sequential order, the report stated.

- The autopsy report did not give information regarding the range from which the gun was fired, but in 2004, a physician practicing forensic medicine was asked to read the report and give his opinion. The physician answered that it appeared the shots could have been fired from fifteen feet away. The physician also speculated there could have been more than one shooter, given the angles of the three shots. Further, information about all of the bullets causing these wounds was not available in the report.

“The police chief was saying awful things about Cleve when he came out of the house. I know that Judge Gray was just trying to tone things down before the gossip got out of hand,” Davis said. “But I wouldn’t think he meant for the gag order never to be lifted.”

Six months after McDowell’s murder, a fire occurred in downtown Drew, devastating the town’s largest department store and the vacant office next door. All of the records McDowell had collected over the years from his personal research on unsolved race-based murders and lynchings were stored in the vacant office and reportedly destroyed.

The fire’s flames were so high that some Cleveland residents could see the “lighted sky” eleven miles away from Drew. Others reported hearing an “explosion” in Drew at the beginning of the fire. Drew police chief Burner Smith refused to release the records of the fire.

Webb changes plea

Juarez Webb filed a Petition to Enter a Guilty Plea, reducing his plea from capital murder to manslaughter on January 26, 1998. In his request, Webb said he “shot and killed Cleve McDowell, without malice, in the heat of passion” and “not in necessary self-defense.” Webb also asserted that he was earlier “coerced” into pleading guilty to manslaughter by his attorneys:

“They told me I wasn’t going to be able – I wasn’t going to be able to get nowhere in this case, that I might as well go ahead and take a plea; otherwise, it would be over with me.... I guess they were talking about my life.”

On July 22, 1998, Webb reversed himself and filed a “jailhouse” petition to withdraw his guilty plea, citing “a series of interrogations, threats and promises [made to him] by various law enforcement officials” and “a series of statements of an incriminating nature [that were] obtained from Petitioner in taped, written and oral form against the Petitioner’s will and consent [sic].”ⁱⁱⁱ

Interrogations, Webb claimed, were “unsolicited” and “initiated by ... the instance [sic] of arresting officers and other varies [sic] courthouse officials.” Webb said he did not waive his rights to silence or counsel or self-incrimination, but that he was forced unwillingly and without counsel present to answer questions.

Webb said he was “repeatedly interrogated and threatened as well as coerced to admit to the crime in an involuntary nature, thus rendering his guilty plea involuntary as the result of being threatened by the officials to receive the death penalty.” Courthouse records indicate that Webb was taken for a psychological examination to determine if he was potentially suicidal.

Appointed counsel, Webb went to trial on January 27, 1998 and “maintained his innocence,” his petition states. His family was “repeatedly harassed by law enforcement officials and was told by his attorneys that he would get the death penalty if he did not take a plea for a lesser charge of manslaughter.”

Webb asserted the charge of capital murder was dropped to manslaughter “due to the pressure and threats and unlawful statements obtained as well as other evidence and unlawful arrest against his will.”

Webb also admitted giving “false statements in court to end the truma [sic] and nightmare and to protect his family from further threats and harassments ... [the] guilty pleas was made unwillingly, involuntarily and [he] was coerced to give his plea to avoid a big trial and publicity on his family.” What Webb wanted was permission to withdraw his plea of guilty and to prove his innocence “so that the real suspect can be caught.”

At the time of his slaying, McDowell was Webb’s court-appointed attorney on earlier burglary charges. “The police thought Webb killed Cleve to steal his Cadillac, money and jewelry. It was all missing from his home when his body was found. They said Webb confessed to the killing when he was arrested,” Davis said.

At Webb’s preliminary hearing, according to a *Clarion-Ledger* account, Drew Police Chief Burner Smith testified that Webb, 18, told police “McDowell had thrown him on the floor and tried to pull his pants down to sexually assault him.” Further, “District Attorney Carlton said accepting Webb’s plea was the best decision” since the case was “not iron-clad” and that McDowell “needed to be remembered for what he did as a leader in the Civil Rights Movement at a time when that wasn’t too popular.”

Webb did not get what he had hoped for. On July 9, 1999, Circuit Judge Gray Evans denied and dismissed his motion. Gray wrote that it had “probably” been a “wise” recommendation by Webb’s attorney to urge Webb to plead guilty to manslaughter rather than face the possibility of a death sentence from a conviction of capital murder.

Many questions remain unanswered. There are a moderate number of records in the Sovereignty Commission files on McDowell; most reports are harmless. His former office manager said that McDowell received some of the reports to look over before they were made public, but did not appear disturbed over the information obtained. One last record gave the name of a possible Jackson “homosexual partner,” and also declared McDowell as a young black man on the rise – someone who impressed the Governor.

As Davis spoke about McDowell’s murder, she remembered something that struck her as unusual: “When Cleve was murdered, the strangest thing to me was how neat the coffee table looked. I went into the house with Cleve’s sister and that was the first thing I noticed.

“It was always a mess, with papers, files, and books stacked up and even falling off. Everyone who knew him would remember that table. But that morning it looked like it had been cleaned up when we went into the house. Every paper was stacked neatly in a pile.

“There were these neat piles all over the table. My eye caught the coffee table immediately, as soon as I walked in. I had never seen it like this before,” Davis said.

Retired funeral home employee Woodrow Jackson of Tutwiler backed up Davis’s assertion. That McDowell’s coffee table was straightened the day his body was discovered, Jackson found intriguing.

“This says something. His coffee table was always very messy. He would never have straightened it up, himself. I didn’t see his body, but from what I could reconstruct from the rumors going around, there might have been two people involved in the shooting.”

Jackson, who embalmed Emmett Till in 1955, talked softly. “I knew Cleve very well. I didn’t embalm his body; I believe it was someone from Cleveland who did. But Cleve was a good lawyer and we often spoke about Emmett Till because he was interested in finding all who were involved in the murder.

“Cleve kept boxes of records in his office. I know, because I saw them. I remember a year or so ago before Cleve was murdered he brought Emmett Till up again and still seemed upset, but he would never give out any details. When his office burned down after he was murdered, a lot of important papers had to have been lost.”^{iv}

Still another person who knew McDowell responded with surprise over his cleaned-up coffee table. “Now that means something,” Margaret Block said. The former SNCC activist was getting ready to have McDowell do some legal work for her. “I was very surprised when he was killed, but I had never heard any of these details until now, including that his coffee table was cleaned up.”^v

Nettie Davis also noticed McDowell’s guns were missing. “He had guns in many places throughout the house and his office. He was always within reach of a gun. I don’t know how he could have been so surprised as to have been shot. I never learned what happened to all of his guns in his house or in his office. He also kept guns in his car.”

The FBI, responding to a Freedom of Information request, first asserted it has no records on McDowell – strange, since several close friends say that FBI agents visited’s office in the years before his death. Later, several records were sent by the FBI regarding a minor incident during McDowell’s tenure as a Tunica Judge.

One Drew friend said he always believed McDowell’s murder might be related to a “very large” settlement he won for a client who lived near Tunica and “may have involved something to do with a utility company.” Several other friends confirmed this story.

McDowell had invited this friend and his wife to dinner shortly before he was murdered. “He said he had won ‘the big’ case he’d been working on and for once had lots of money. I didn’t know anything about this case, but I did hear that no attorney in Memphis would take it. Some say there might have been mob involvement.”

THERE IS STILL another story deserving attention that could give clues to the mystery of McDowell’s murder. Two close friends independently recalled an incident that took place about four years before McDowell’s death: McDowell had learned that a close friend, Henry S. Mims, an Alabama lawyer who grew up in Drew had “committed suicide.” McDowell’s immediate reaction was that it would be impossible for Mims to have killed himself; it wasn’t in his personality.^{vi}

Several Drew friends were set to drive to Alabama for the funeral, but McDowell suggested he would “go out first and try to find out what happened.”

Paying a visit to Mims' widow before the funeral, McDowell asked for permission to view the body, but she refused. She also said the casket would be closed for the funeral, McDowell later told his minister.

McDowell would not have taken such news sitting down, but most likely went to the funeral home and found the body, his friend said. "He would find out what happened to Mims. He would never take 'no' for an answer."

From Montgomery, Alabama, McDowell phoned a friend back in Drew to report seeing Mims' body with "cuts and broken fingers." Something was very wrong with the suicide story, he told a friend.

McDowell planned driving back to Drew and said he would not stay for the funeral. He also suggested that his friends not drive to Alabama, as planned, but stay home. "He told me this was not going to be open casket and that he was angry with his friend's wife. He also said something was very wrong."

McDowell's friends went to the funeral, anyway and were surprised at "all of the California people" who attended. "So many, that most of his other friends could not get inside of the church." Mims was a graduate of the City College of Los Angeles, and apparently had maintained contact with the Californians.

When McDowell arrived back in Drew, he told his minister there was no evidence of a suicide and that Mims showed signs of torture; he'd been found by his wife, "hanging from a ladder inside of his garage," but "the whole thing looked like a setup to make his murder look like a suicide."^{vii}

Then McDowell said something strange, something "out of character," according to his minister. "He asked me to promise I would conduct his funeral when the time should come – and he meant it," the minister said.

"I thought he was kidding at first, and I told him I would be dying before he would since I'm quite a bit older. But he was serious and he looked scared. I asked him if he knew what happened to Mims and if he knew who did it. He said yes, and then looked down and said nothing else."

For the next several years, McDowell – also a Baptist minister – decreased his time spent working in his law office, instead working at building his own church congregation.

"He would spend more time picking out the dishes and other special purchases for the church than coming to work," recounted Nettie Davis, who with her husband also confirmed some parts of the "Alabama funeral" story.

"Sometime I'd get worried and tell Cleve 'we' might get sued," she laughed. "He just really changed after the Alabama trip, and it was so important for him that everything be done exactly right for the new church. That mattered to him more than anything else."

Mims had been to Drew visiting friends and family only a few weeks before he died. "He looked fine. He was happy and I remember we all had dinner together," Davis' husband said. Mims relatives in Drew all refuse to be interviewed.

NEARLY ALL OF McDowell's friends requested anonymity when asked to talk about his murder. One friend, a former Parchman prison guard, explained: "Most of us know that Cleve's death was not just a matter of a young kid shooting him because he thought Cleve was trying to molest him.

"That would be impossible, anyway, because Webb was too old, legally, to be molested.

“But, there had been FBI hanging around here, and I personally think Cleve had to be one of the reasons why.... His family and friends, I think, are still afraid to talk. They know what it is still like in the Delta, and so do I [since] I know how some of the richest people work.”^{viii}

The former Parchman guard, speaking only on the condition of anonymity, stated that in 1962, when James Meredith was attempting to enter the University of Mississippi, he was approached by a “rich, white planter” who “tried to hire” him “to kill Meredith.”

“He wanted me to ‘do something’ about Meredith. Of course, I said no. But that is how it has always been around here – rich white people paying off others, including blacks, to murder black people. They think this keeps us in line. And this has not stopped – it still goes on.”^{ix}

Mississippi attorney Constance Slaughter, quoted in *The Clarion-Ledger* at the time of McDowell’s death, refused an interview when contacted, becoming angry enough to hang up the telephone.^x

Charles McLauren of Indianola, an active civil rights advocate and SNCC member who knew McDowell did not want to talk either, and deferred to McDowell’s family. Conceding that family members would not talk about McDowell, McLaurin offered, “They think it’s better to let a sleeping dog lie.”

It is the “gay” issue that keeps many friends and family from talking about McDowell, McLaurin confirmed before quickly ending the call.^{xi}

One young man interviewed in Drew, also requesting anonymity, claimed that he had been “molested” by McDowell “for years” and “wish I’d shot him, myself.”^{xii}

But he also said that an attempt to “make [McDowell] look like a pedophile” had been a set-up. Cleveland parents of a young child made the accusation, but no charges were ever filed. The interviewee, who said he also knew Webb, asserted that Webb told him he’d “had sex with first and then shot him afterwards.” This interviewee also stated that FBI personnel were in Drew “by noon” after McDowell’s body was discovered. “They had been watching him,” he said, but gave no details.^{xiii}

WHAT OF THE “gay issue”? Rumors persist that McDowell and several other “well-known” Civil Rights veterans were “closet” gay. It was a time of forced anonymity, since gays were considered immoral if not communistic. Even in 2005 a gay in rural Mississippi would quite possibly have a rough time.

Sovereignty Commission files show that agents jumped at any chance to report (by name) the alleged gay behavior of blacks. Yet long-established rumors still circulate that Governor Ross Barnett, white and a Citizens Council member, was gay and “slept with at least one well-known black activist.” Apparently no Sovereignty Commission reports claiming as such have seen the light of day.

Professor John Howard of Queen’s College in London offered an insight to gay activities in the Mississippi Delta during the Civil Rights Movement in his thesis on “[T]he love that dare not speak its name in the Bible belt.” Howard’s academic paper was turned into a popular press book, *Men Like That*, as the author worked to “debunk the myth that same-sex desires can’t find expression outside the big city.”

Nominally conservative institutions of small town life – home, church, school, and workplace – were the “very sites where queer sexuality flourished,” Howard stated.^{xiv} “Far more” is to be discovered: “It’s still early days for Southern lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgender (LGBT) history. We’ve only begun to scratch the surface,” Howard offered through an e-mail interview in 2004.

QUESTION: To what extent did race place a role in selection of sexual partners in homosexual men and women in Mississippi in civil rights and pre-civil rights days?

HOWARD: I'm thinking of Gov. Ross Barnett ... since the rumours are still thick. Generally speaking, before the 1960s, LGBT Southerners, black and white, participated in similar practices and networks. But they were doing so in two parallel, segregated worlds. If gender and sexual non-conformity had to be very carefully negotiated, then all the more so if it involved interracial interaction. That's not to say that there was no interracial homosexual activity before the civil rights era. Obviously, it was easier for whites to approach blacks. And of course we have more evidence of that.

Some have even suggested that many elite white males in particular assumed access to black male bodies, in the way that, since slavery, they had expected access to black females.

Especially illuminating here is William Armstrong Percy III's article about his kinsman, William Alexander Percy, with whom I'm sure you're familiar. The article appears in my edited collection, "Carryin' On in the Lesbian and Gay South" (New York University Press, 1997). That, along with what I've written in "Men Like That," is about as much as we know at this point about queer history in the Delta.

Aaron Henry is probably an exception, not the rule, when it comes to black-white gay activity. There were few with his level of power, few who would have taken the risk of approaching a white male. His life history also demonstrates that at least some young white gay Southerners would have been willing to engage in interracial, intergenerational, homosexual activity.

That is, they would have been able to ignore all the social norms and taboos – those which described blacks as inferior, older people as undesirable. And of course we have evidence to suggest that those willing to combat racial injustice and get involved in the Civil Rights Movement may have been more willing to challenge prevailing sexual attitudes and values as well.

QUESTION: Nobody who really knew Cleve McDowell wants to talk, even now. While he was probably gay, the evidence I've collected shows he was shot in the back and quite possibly by two men. Why won't his friends and family get past this to try and find out who murdered him?

ANSWER: A deep-rooted and longstanding homosexual homicide mythology associates gay men with dangerous lifestyles and disgraceful deaths. Further, up until the late 1960s, homosexuality in the South was largely accommodated with pretence of ignorance, a system of mutual discretion in which much was understood but left unsaid. To this day, many rely on that quiet accommodationism, preferring silence or subtlety over open confrontation, despite all the hooping and hollering of evangelical ministers.

That's a very recent phenomenon. Protestant ministers in the South didn't begin railing against homosexuality, at least in large numbers, until the late 1960s and early 1970s.

I'd be curious to know more about your evidence on McDowell, especially the notion that he was "perhaps a pedophile." Of course, his enemies would have wanted that sort of idea to circulate. But do you have proof that he had sexual intercourse with children? With pre-pubescent youth? It's worth mentioning that the legal age of consent here in Great Britain is sixteen for both heterosexual and homosexual sex. Are you sure McDowell's partners were incapable of consenting? I mention this because such accusations are a classic form of intimidation by white supremacists.

Bill Higgs, as you know, was accused of having sex with a sixteen-year-old. This may have been true. But it also may have involved what I would refer to as a set of consensual acts. You need only look back several decades to find a time when the age of consent in Southern states was what would now be seen as shockingly low. [The statutory age of sexual consent was increased from 14 to 16 in Mississippi as of January 1, 2000.]

* * *

Aaron Henry died on May 19, 1997, after suffering a stroke on Christmas day. At his memorial service, Henry's favorite farewell was printed in the program, an Irish blessing that he had used for years in his speeches:

*May the road rise to meet you
May the wind always be at your back,
May the sun shine warm upon your face,
May the rain fall soft upon your field. ...*

Biographer Constance Curry, a civil rights activist and long-time friend of Henry's who would later co-write and complete *The Fire Ever Burning*, the tender story of Aaron Henry's life, remembered the impact of hearing this particular song: "There couldn't have been a clearer message from Aaron to me regarding the writing of [the] book. I felt as if he were looking over my shoulder, giving his blessing but saying in his insistent way, 'Well, we've just got to get on with it. He was a wonderful person.'"^{xv}

Near the end of 1997, on December 22, the Mississippi Supreme Court upheld Byron De La Beckwith's conviction in the slaying of Medgar Evers.

On January 26, 1998, the offices of *The Jackson Advocate* were firebombed. The crusading newspaper sustained more than \$100,000 in building and equipment damages. A spokeswoman for the SCLC described the attack as a hate crime. Although the newspaper had been attacked more than twenty times since the late 1970s, its publisher Charles Tisdale declared he would not be intimidated.

In March of 1998, *The Clarion-Ledger* reported jury tampering took place in the 1968 trial of Imperial Wizard Sam Bowers in connection with the killing of Vernon Dahmer, according to FBI reports.

U. S. District Judge William H. Barbour Jr. opened most of the Sovereignty Commission files in March of 1998; on May 28, Imperial Wizard Sam Bowers, Deavours Nix and Charles Noble were arrested in connection with the 1966 slaying of Vernon Dahmer.

A grand jury on July 31, 1998 indicted five men in connection with the April 12, 1970 killing of Rainey Pool: Dennis Howell Newton, 49, of Flora; Joe Oliver Watson, 56, of Rolling Fork; James "Doc" Caston, 65, of Satartia; his brother, Charles E. Caston, 60, of Holly Bluff; and the Caston's half brother, Harold Spivey Crimm, 49, of Vicksburg.

A month later, Bowers was convicted of murdering Vernon Dahmer and sentenced to life in prison by a Forrest County jury.

Mae Bertha Carter died of cancer April 28, 1999, at her home in Drew. "Courage, determination, deep faith in God, and a vision of what justice acts like daily were the driving forces in Mae Bertha's life," said American Friends Service Committee executive director Kara Newell. The organization had assisted the Carter family in desegregating the schools of Drew, providing field representatives to investigate reports of intimidation and reprisals and providing assistance.

On June 30, 1999, a Humphreys County jury acquitted Dennis Howell Newton in the April 12, 1970, slaying of Rainey Pool, concluding he was a bystander, not a participant in Pool's beating.

On November 13, 1999, a Humphreys County jury convicted James "Doc" Caston, 66, of Satartia, his brother, Charles E. Caston, 64, of Holly Bluff, and their half-brother, Hal Crimm, 50, of Vicksburg, of manslaughter in Pool's murder. Joe Oliver Watson, 56, of Rolling Fork, who had pleaded guilty to manslaughter, testified against the others.

Federal authorities, also in November, reopened an investigation into the Klan's 1966 lynching of Ben Chester White after learning the killing took place on federal property. Ernest Avants was arrested on June 7 in connection with the Klan's killing of Ben Chester White in the Homochitto National Forest.

On January 13, 2000, federal authorities reopened an investigation into the lynchings of Charles Eddie Moore and Henry Hezekiah. *The Clarion-Ledger* revealed the killings possibly took place on federal property. The paper also reported that FBI documents in the case were not destroyed, as agents previously said.^{xvi}

With privacy issues adjudicated, the remaining Mississippi Sovereignty Commission records were opened to the public January 18, 2001.

Rounding out the year, in November, the Associated Press reported that two University of Mississippi students were expelled from their fraternity after an Internet photograph showed one dressed as a police officer holding a gun to the head of the second, who was in blackface.^{xvii}

School officials said they were investigating the Alpha Tau Omega fraternity's involvement in the incident there. The two fraternity members whose photographs were taken during the all-white fraternity's Halloween party were not identified.

A judge dismissed all charges against Charles Noble, arrested earlier in connection with the 1966 slaying of Vernon Dahmer, on January 16, 2002.

On February 24, the following year, Ernest Avants went on trial for the killing of Ben Chester White in the first federal murder trial in connection with a slaying from the civil rights era.

Thirteen black farmers, some for Mississippi, once again filed a racial discrimination lawsuit against the U. S. Department of Agriculture in September of 2004. The suit alleged the agency continued to deny them farm loans even after USDA officials settled an earlier lawsuit in 1999 that accused it of the same offenses.

As part of a 1999 settlement of *Piggford vs. Veneman*, the USDA agreed to pay damages and forgive some loans, and promised to establish new guidelines to assure fairness. But the settlement, which recognized discrimination against 22,363 black farmers, was deemed a failure by the National Black Farmers Association and the Washington-based environmental and health advocacy organization Environmental Working Groups.

They issued a joint report in July charging the USDA failed to recognize thousands of farmers who claimed they were eligible for compensation. The report also said USDA officials intentionally kept payments away from the farmers.^{xviii}

As the year 2004 drew to an end, 20 state lawmakers made news headlines by participating in a Council of Conservative Citizens (CCC) gathering, and veteran civil rights journalist Bill Minor reported:

Mississippi's Legislature isn't noted for many things, and this is one record it certainly should not be proud of: More of its members than any Legislature in the South have in recent years paid homage to the Council of Concerned [sic]Citizens or CCC, a race-hate and anti-Semitic organization. This writer and others pointed out in 1998 when the CCC first came on the public radar screen that the hate group is a virtual reincarnation of the once-powerful segregationist White Citizens Councils that seemed to disappear 25 years ago. Recently, "Intelligence Report," published by the Birmingham-based Southern Poverty Law Center, which monitors racial and anti-Semitic groups operating in the South, identified a list of 38 Southern public officials who have cozied up to the CCC, 23 of them present state lawmakers. Of those 23, amazingly 20 are from Mississippi. All but one of the Mississippi lawmakers is a Republican.^{xix}

Also troubling Minor was that other Mississippi officials had attended or spoken at gatherings of the CCC in the previous four years, including Gov. Haley Barbour "when he was campaigning for governor last year, [and] was photographed with a group of CCC leaders attending a barbeque rally at Blackhawk, in Carroll County. When the photo ran on the group's Web site and news stories resulted, Barbour called the group's racist views 'indefensible,' but declined to have the photo removed."

During the earlier 2000 campaign for election to the State Supreme Court, Presiding Justice Kay Cobb had twice appeared at CCC gatherings, according to Minor, "either to introduce a guest speaker or as a speaker herself." ... "Like most of the Mississippi lawmakers who show up at CCC functions Cobb claimed ignorance of what kind of hate group the CCC was, despite published articles."^{xx}

In January of 2005, various state lawmakers were set to meet with CCC members, this time reported by Emily Wagster Pettus of the Associated Press.^{xxi} "Bill Hinson of Pearl, president of the Great Southern chapter of CCC, announced on the group's Web site that 'several House and Senate members' are to speak."

Pettus reported that Hinson "wouldn't tell The Associated Press the names of lawmakers or where the event is taking place, although AP learned it will be at a South Jackson fish house." Hinson told Pettus that

his chapter was more focused on “taxation, Southern heritage” and could be referred to as “the Christian right, something like that.”^{xxii}

Mark Potok, director of the Intelligence Project for the Montgomery, Alabama-based Southern Poverty Law Center, interviewed by Pettus, disagreed, asserting it was a “patent falsehood” to say the CCC — also known as the C of CC — is not driven by racial issues:

I think five minutes on the C of CC Web site will convince anyone that the C of CC is a patently white supremacist group. The CCC's national Web site has a question-and-answer section about race that says: “The C of CC opposes government sponsored race preference programs (e.g. affirmative action, quotas, forced integration) that are bestowed on nonwhites and other preferred minorities at taxpayer expense. The C of CC also stands against the tide of nonwhite, Third World immigrants swamping this country.” Its site also says “the C of CC has been singularly effective in thwarting many schemes by leftwing militants to rob white Americans of their rights and heritage,” including an attempt in 2001 to remove the Confederate battle emblem from the Mississippi flag. [The CCC's Web site] is a vile, Klan-like site.^{xxiii}

State Rep. John Moore, R-Brandon, scheduled to speak at the CCC gathering, told the Associated Press reporter that he would “talk about issues to be considered during the current legislative session,” adding “he didn't know anything about the group's position on race.

“If I find out for certain they are a racist organization, I am going to confront them,” he said. “You hear that the NAACP is racist, but that wouldn't keep me from talking to them,” Moore was quoted in the Pettus article.

* * *

Winding down ...

ONE MORNING IN March of 2005 during a Greenwood radio show known for its regional opinion, the two white DJ's were reacting to a story about “the legislature requiring hair braiders to get a license” (they supported the proposed legislation).

Conversation moved to author John Grisham “and his dumb books about Mississippi.... He don't even talk like us.” Most callers agreed with the DJs – and if they didn't, they were cut off.

Dissent remains a shaky proposition in Miss'sippi.

* * *

EPILOGUE

On August 13, 1993 Erle Johnston, former Sovereignty Commission director and the most powerful, sat down for an oral history interview with Yasuhiro Katagiri, a Fulbright scholar from Japan studying at the University of Southern Mississippi. Johnston waxed philosophic of his days growing up in Grenada and about the state spy organization he headed for five years – from 1963 to 1968 – giving a unique look into his life and into the agency that served as Mississippi’s “all-seeing eyes” in the modern Civil Rights Movement:

“I remember growing up ... in a segregated town. I thought nothing about it. The town built a swimming pool. It was for whites only. Blacks never even tried to get in it.

* * *

“The picture show – blacks went upstairs and whites went downstairs. Nobody objected to it. So, we were always under the impression that they were satisfied with the relationship because – and this is the main reason – because never in my town of Grenada where I grew up, did a black family go hungry or a black family needed help that there wasn’t white people that did it for them.”

* * *

“The grand idea was that we could turn the Sovereignty Commission into a big public relations agency ... in order to try to project Mississippi outside the state as a good place to be, as a good place to work, as a good place to settle down.... Of course we recognized that one civil rights murder was worse than a hundred blacks getting Ph.D. degrees, you know. But the idea was that we could try as much as we could to overcome the attitude outside Mississippi that we were a lawless state as far as race was concerned. We never got anywhere with it.”

* * *

“But then came 1964. And all these invading people from around the country came in and upset Mississippi. They went around dressed slovenly and long hair and fingernails ... always confronting people and creating riots. The governor had to get the highway patrol increased to take care of [them]. Had that not happened Paul Johnson would have had Mississippi sailing right on into the twentieth century.”^{xxiv}

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WASHINGTON, D. C. — Lawmakers demonstrated overwhelming support Monday for a

resolution that apologizes for the Senate's failure to do anything to stop lynchings that killed thousands of people over more than eight decades.

About 80 of the 100 members of the Senate co-sponsored the resolution. But [Mississippi] Republican Senators Thad Cochran and Trent Lott were not among them, even though Mississippi led the nation in the numbers of lynchings.

The resolution passed on the same day juror selection began in the trial of Edgar Ray Killen, charged with murder in the 1964 slayings of civil rights workers James Chaney, Michael Schwerner and Andrew Goodman in Neshoba County.^{xxv}

ⁱ Jimmie Gates, “McDowell, ex-NAACP leader, shot to death,” *The Clarion-Ledger*, March 14, 1997, 1-A.

ⁱⁱ It was no secret that McDowell and the assistant district attorney had a difficult relationship. “Cleve would do things like wiggle his tongue in her face when he beat her in court, which was often. I’d tell him to be nicer, but he really liked to upset her,” McDowell’s former office manager said during an interview in 2004. Possibly compounding the difficult relationship, the ADA was an Ole Miss graduate.

ⁱⁱⁱ The Petition (No. 97-0109) to the Circuit Court of Sunflower County is date-stamped July 22, 1998 and signed by the circuit clerk.

^{iv} Interview with Woodrow Wilson Jackson.

^v Conversation with Margaret Block, April 2005

^{vi} The story of Henry S. Mims was told to the author in 2004 by two independent sources, both friends of McDowell’s.

^{vii} A circuit court employee in Huntsville Alabama who said she knew Mims, as well, stated in April 2005 during a telephone interview with the author that while Mims “officially committed suicide,” many of his friends in Alabama had questioned this medical explanation for the cause of death. “There were a lot of rumors going around at the time,” she said. The woman said she was not comfortable repeating any rumors, however.

^{viii} Interview by Susan Klopfer with former Parchman guard, November 2004. This person asked to remain anonymous.

^{ix} Ibid.

^x Telephone conversation with Constance Slaughter, 2003.

^{xi} Telephone conversation with Charles McLauren, November 3, 2004.

^{xii} During the time I’ve been working on this book, I have run into five other people who told me or strongly inferred that Cleve was a “homosexual,” including two Sunflower County attorneys, a Drew resident who did not know him personally, an officer of the Circuit Court, and a prison guard who said she knew him and Webb, as well.

^{xiii} Conversation in January of 2005 with a black male in Drew who asked he remain anonymous.

^{xiv} John Howard, “Men Like That: A Southern Queer History,” (London: The University of Chicago Press, 1999).

^{xv} Henry/Curry, Prologue, xxi.; telephone conversation, 2003.

^{xvi} July 14, 2005

^{xvii} Associated Press, *The Cincinnati Post*, Cincinnati, Ohio, November 9, 2001.

^{xviii} Peraite C. Paul, “USDA Undermines Historical Civil Rights Settlement with Black Farmers,” *The Atlanta Journal-Constitution*, September 10, 2004.

^{xix} Bill Minor, “At least 20 state lawmakers still ‘cozying up’ to CCC hate group,” Special to *The Clarion-Ledger*, November 14, 2004.

^{xx} Ibid. CCC claimed 5,000 Mississippi members according to its website in 2005.

^{xxi} Emily Wagster Pettus, “Conservative group to meet with state lawmaker,” *The Associated Press*, January 23, 2005.

^{xxii} Ibid.

^{xxiii} Ibid. The Southern Poverty Law Center, which tracks hate groups, issued a report in the fall of 2004 asserting that at least 38 current federal, state and local office holders in several states had attended CCC meetings since 2000, with most giving speeches to local chapters. The report stated that 23 of those listed were from Mississippi.

^{xxiv} Oral history with Erle Johnston, a cooperative project of the University of Southern Mississippi Libraries and USM’s Center for Oral History and Cultural Heritage. Interview conducted by Yasuhiro Katagiri at Johnston’s home in Forest, Miss., on August 13, 1993.

^{xxv} Ana Radelat, “Senate approves lynching resolution,” *Clarion-Ledger* Washington Bureau, June 14, 2005.