

## 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.

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“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.”

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“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.”

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“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.”<sup>i</sup>

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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.<sup>ii</sup>

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<sup>i</sup> 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.

<sup>ii</sup> Ana Radelat, "Senate approves lynching resolution," *Clarion-Ledger* Washington Bureau, June 14, 2005.