

To South Africans of color such as my mother, who came of age in the years after 1948, when the white minority government launched the social experiment known as apartheid, the United States beckoned as a country of promise and opportunity, a faraway place relatively free of the racialized degradation South Africa had come to epitomize. Americans, especially black Americans, were glamorous and well off and lived in beautiful homes, my mother and many in her generation believed. Although they understood that whites ran most things in America, too, it was hard to conceive of a life as oppressive as that experienced by people of color under the strictures of South African *baaskaap*, or white domination.

As she planned to leave, my mother believed that she was escaping a country on the verge of self-destruction, its trauma highlighted by events that were increasingly capturing the world's attention. In 1966, thousands of people had been evicted from District Six, a multiracial area in central Cape Town, and dumped on the barren wastelands of the Cape Flats. In May 1966, anti-apartheid activist Bram Fischer was sentenced to life in prison for his work with the African National Congress (ANC) and its military wing, Umkhonto we Sizwe (Spear of the Nation), and the South African Communist Party. A month later, U.S. Senator Robert F. Kennedy toured the country, speaking out against apartheid, meeting with ANC president-general Albert Luthuli, and criticizing the government in a historic speech at the University of Cape Town. In July 1966, the government banned nearly one thousand people under the Suppression of Communism Act and the Riotous Assemblies Act.

In September 1966, Prime Minister Hendrik F. Verwoerd, the architect of apartheid, was assassinated in parliament by a deranged coloured messenger. The effect of Verwoerd's death—he was stabbed in the heart as he sat in the legislative chamber—“was as though a lid had been lifted off the bubbling cauldron,” according to historian Douglas Brown. On

December 20, 1966, the United Nations General Assembly took a first step toward imposing economic sanctions on South Africa, in a draft resolution that named the country as a threat to international peace. And that same year, the widely publicized case of Sandra Laing illuminated the devastating impact of apartheid policies on individual human lives.

Laing was a victim of the 1950 Population Registration Act, under which every child was classified by race. A fifteen-year-old girl brought up in a white family, she was expelled from her all-white school because of suspicions that she was of mixed race, or coloured. Though her parents successfully fought the government's Race Classification Board to have their daughter reclassified as white, they themselves eventually disowned her when she ran off to a township with a black man and had children.

At the age of eighteen, Laing applied for an identity document necessary to place her children in school. The authorities confirmed that she was white—and promptly threatened to take away her children because they were not white, but coloured. The only way Laing could be classified as coloured and keep her children was to seek her father's permission. But he was still bitter over her decision to elope with a black man and refused to endorse her application. Told by the authorities that she could apply for reclassification without her father's permission when she reached age twenty-one, Laing nonetheless spent another six years as a person without an identity, unable to function in society and cut off from her white family. She was a casualty of South Africa's ruthless pursuit of racial purity, its assault on any reminder of the country's problematic mixed-race heritage.

With these events as a backdrop, my mother found herself peering out the smudged oval of an airplane window, scrutinizing the airport buildings in Durban in December 1966. Uncertainty, mixed with exhilaration, flooded her thoughts. She and I—though I was only a toddler—were beginning our journey to America. She didn't know what to expect in Mississippi, her destination, but she was sure it would be weird. That was to become her official impression of our trip. From the moment we boarded the plane in Durban, en route to New York, she couldn't get over how very strange everything seemed: the people, the way they sounded when they spoke English (if they spoke English at all), the way they looked at her.

Our first stop was at the Ivory Coast airport. Yvonne was shocked when she saw black faces everywhere and realized that black people were actually running things. Under the iron-fisted racial hierarchy of

apartheid, most blacks were relegated to jobs such as domestics, gardeners, and mineworkers. Yvonne had never seen or heard of black people confidently in charge of anything other than cooking, cleaning, and caring for the babies of whites, Indians, and even some coloureds. In Ivory Coast, it seemed, the black men who came on board in their smart, crisp uniforms for some unknown purpose and the black workers who scrambled to ready the airplane for the next leg of our journey were clearly in charge.

The next layover, in Paris, confirmed her sense of unreality. It was all new, all strange, all weird, she thought, as we made our way through the maelstrom of Charles de Gaulle Airport: the customs agents assaulting her with rapid-fire French, the swirls and eddies of people jostling us as we made our way through the vast airport.

We stayed in Paris that night. On our way back to the airport, Yvonne couldn't help noticing the broken-down homes on the side of the highway. French people were supposed to be so cultured—at least that's what she'd heard in South Africa—yet here they were living in these awful shacks! Yvonne told me later that she wondered what she was getting herself into, what other surprises were in store for her on the other side of the world.

In Paris, we boarded a flight to New York's Kennedy Airport. On our arrival, Yvonne surrendered a sealed envelope containing chest X-rays to the immigration officials. After being cleared for entry, we stood in the arrival area and waited for her husband. My father, a stocky, caramel-colored man, whom I barely knew—he had been in and out of South Africa since my birth a year and a half earlier—but would come to know as Daddy, soon found us.

He had met Yvonne in Durban two years earlier, when she was living with Auntie Bessie and Bessie's husband, Raymond, a cab driver, in Greenwood Park. Daddy was a merchant marine on shore leave in Durban, and Raymond brought him home for dinner. Yvonne and Daddy became close, seeing each other whenever he was in port and corresponding by letter when he was away at sea. They were married in Durban on August 8, 1966. Their marriage certificate lists my father as an "American Negro" and my mother as "Coloured."

"I was worried about y'all 'cause of all the snow and the bad weather," he said, hugging and kissing Yvonne and me. "Did y'all have any problems on the way?"

“No, we alright, Dave,” Yvonne replied.

“Don’t worry, everything’s gonna be fine,” Daddy assured Yvonne. “Come on,” he urged, shepherding us through the airport, “we’ve got to catch another plane.”

Our next flight took us to Atlanta, where more wintry weather grounded our connecting flight to Jackson, Mississippi.

“There’s no snow where we’re going,” Daddy told Yvonne. “And my mama’s gonna be at the airport to pick us up when we get there, so don’t worry about nothin’.”

As we piled into a taxi for a hotel near the Atlanta airport, Daddy told Yvonne we were going to be staying with my new grandma for a little while, in Meridian, Mississippi, the place where he had grown up—the place he had escaped when he was fifteen. That night at the hotel, Yvonne watched television for the first time and was introduced to American culture the next morning by Mr. Green Jeans on the *Captain Kangaroo* show. The apartheid government had banned television in South Africa, believing it to be subversive.

Sure enough, my new grandma was there to meet us at the Jackson airport. As soon as we stepped off the plane, she was bounding through the arrival lounge to see the wife and little boy whom my father, her only child, had brought all the way from overseas.

She was a big woman with a short salt-and-pepper Afro and a wide smile. She gave my Daddy a big bear hug and then turned to my mother and me.

“Well, now, looka here,” she gushed. “I sure am glad to see y’all.” She shook Yvonne’s hand and pulled me to her bosom, while taking stock of us: Yvonne with her olive complexion, long whip of black hair, and exotic bracelets and earrings; and me with my shock of black, curly hair and saucer-wide eyes. Grandma had never spoken to my mother before and had become aware of our existence only through a few photographs Daddy had sent her from South Africa. Now she had come face to face with the mysterious woman from South Africa, the foreign woman who, she thought, had caused her son to divorce a perfectly good Mississippi woman—the mother of two of his children, no less.

All along the highway on our drive to Meridian, Yvonne saw nothing but shacks and poor, bedraggled black people, in a landscape of sprawling fields and grinding poverty. This was not at all what she had expected. My mother wanted adventure and excitement. In South Africa, everybody

thought that all Americans were rich and sophisticated. Now that we were traveling ninety miles east across central Mississippi to Meridian, Yvonne felt torn—grateful to Daddy for giving us a new life, but shocked and disappointed that this new place, Mississippi, was not the America she had dreamed of as a little girl growing up in the Transkei town of Kokstad.



Mississippi had failed to live up to the dreams of thousands of black people who huddled in those shacks and shanties. “Mississippi is the nation’s neediest state, ranking fiftieth in most economic and educational categories,” wrote Sally Belfrage in 1965. “Per capita income in 1960 was \$1,285, 47.2 per cent below the national average. For every \$218 paid per Mississippian to the federal government, \$327 went the other way: the state has become a national charity case.”

Speeding across the belly of the state in Grandma’s weathered gray Pontiac, we were venturing into a barely dampened firestorm—riding deeper into a state deemed the most racist in the United States. James W. Silver had observed, “Within its borders the closed society of Mississippi comes as near to approximating a police state as anything we have yet seen in America.” And, as I would come to learn over the years, Mississippi was then the focus of the nation and the world as the forces of segregation vied with the civil rights movement.

The lonely and shadowed hollows teeming with buttercups and milkweeds, the red clay hills, the hay-scattered fields, and the isolated dirt roads could not obscure the violence ripping through the state. The year had begun with the assassination of Vernon Dahmer, a Hattiesburg businessman and a local leader of the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP), who died in a house fire set by members of the Ku Klux Klan. Hattiesburg, a railroad and timber town located just south of Meridian, was an early incubator of the civil rights movement in Mississippi, with the arrival of members of the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee (SNCC) in 1962.

Dahmer had established himself in the local lumber trade and was well respected by both blacks and whites. But he had drawn the ire of Klan Imperial Wizard Sam Bowers for spearheading local NAACP voter registration efforts. When the Klan arrived on the night of January 10, 1966, to burn him out of his house, Dahmer grabbed his shotgun and provided

cover while his family escaped the flames. He exchanged gunfire with the Klan members, who used Molotov cocktails and torches to force him out. Dahmer was eventually pulled from the charred house by friends and family and later died from his injuries at a nearby hospital. Four Klansmen were arrested for Dahmer's murder, but only three were sentenced to life in prison. The fourth, Imperial Wizard Sam Bowers, was freed after a succession of mistrials and hung juries.

Such travesties had been historically and routinely inflicted on black people, far from the normative gaze of American democracy. The southern landscape is littered with the wreckage of brutal slavery, post-Civil War Reconstruction, the inequities of sharecropping, Jim Crow segregation, backbreaking poverty, and ever-present violence. A random tug at the bloodied fabric of Mississippi history turns out a devil's assortment of lynchings, castrations, mutilations, shootings, rapes, and bludgeonings—a sad inventory of white southerners' determination to guard against, in the final analysis, the perceived threat of black male sexuality. According to historian John Dittmer, "Lynching had always been the ultimate form of social control, and neither youth, old age, nor social class offered protection to Negroes who did not stay in their place."

One of the most gruesome examples of brutality meted out to Negroes who strayed from their place in the shadows was the tragic murder of fourteen-year-old Emmett Till. In the summer of 1955, Till's mother, Mamie Till Bradley, who had been part of the mass migration from Mississippi to Chicago, sent her son back south to spend time with her great-uncle, Moses "Preacher" Wright, in Money, Mississippi.

Young Till was about five feet four inches tall, 160 pounds, with a solid build. He stuttered as a result of a bout with polio. His classmates in Chicago knew him as "Bobo," a trickster, a snappy dresser, and a risk-taker. He was also known to carry a photograph of a white girl in his wallet, which he bragged about to fellow students.

When, on a dare, Till called out, "Bye, baby!" to a white woman at a café and then wolf-whistled at her, he had no idea that he had violated the "sanctity of white southern womanhood." He could not have known, when the woman's husband, Roy Bryant, and brother-in-law, J. W. Milam, later got wind of his transgression and abducted him from his great-uncle's cabin, that what may have been permissible in cosmopolitan Chicago was a deadly sin in Mississippi. And surely the boy was naïve when, as the white men beat him within an inch of his life, he produced

the photograph of the white girl from Chicago to show that he was used to talking to white women.

The teenager's badly beaten corpse was found bobbing in the Tallahatchie River. A seventy-four-pound cotton gin fan, attached by barbed wire, had been strung around his neck. His hideously bloated tongue was bulging from his mouth; one of his eyes hung by nerve tendrils against his cheek; and a bullet hole gaped above his right ear. The boy's body had been so pulverized and was in such horrifying shape that Mississippi authorities rushed to seal and bury his coffin.

Till's mother, however, would have none of that, insisting that she wanted the country and the world to witness the barbarity that had been inflicted on her son. In a front-page interview in the *Jackson Daily News* on September 1, 1955, Till Bradley vowed, "The entire state of Mississippi is going to pay for this." Although Bryant and Milam were brought to trial for Till's murder, an all-white, all-male jury acquitted them, leaving unanswered the question of the involvement of others.

The acquittal sparked a wave of outrage and revulsion at Mississippi throughout the country and the world. This outrage was exacerbated when the men described the boy's murder in an exclusive interview with *Look* magazine in 1956. As the rest of the country lurched into the second half of the twentieth century, however haltingly, Mississippi seemed to some to be irredeemably evil and beyond the pale.

Until Emmett Till's murder, Mississippi had been able to fend off the sporadic outside attempts to radicalize rural blacks in the quest for political and economic justice. But both political and economic forces were setting change in motion. The desolation that set in with the introduction of the mechanical cotton picker threatened the sharecropping system and its concomitant domination of black farmers by white landowners. As Nicholas Lemann argues in *The Promised Land*, his masterful rendering of the great northern migration of southern blacks, "The advent of the cotton picker made the maintenance of segregation no longer a matter of necessity for the economic establishment of the South, and thus it helped set the stage for the great drama of segregation's end."

While thousands of blacks left the South in a mass exodus for northern cities such as Chicago and Detroit, Mississippi continued to enshroud itself in a romantic haze of nostalgia about its way of life. Ignored by the rest of the country—no major presidential candidate had visited the state in nearly a century—white Mississippi made much of its august past and

reveled in its self-centered existence. Its people seemed gracious and genteel to a fault, and not much stirred in the sleepy little towns complacently wasting away without regard to events in the rest of the country. Such elaborate courteousness—"Y'all come see us, ya heah?" became the constant refrain of Mississippi hospitality—only partially obscured a vigilant commitment to social and racial mores that were often enforced with violence and reinforced by an irrational hatred of "outside agitators."

Busloads of these "agitators" began pouring into Mississippi and Alabama in 1961. Dubbed the Freedom Riders, hundreds of college students from across the country helped the civil rights movement gain momentum in its assault on segregated bus and train terminals. As Lemann noted, "The Southern civil rights movement didn't become truly galvanized at the small-town level until 1961, when a series of sit-ins and, especially, the journey of the Freedom Riders, who traveled throughout the South sitting in at segregated bus stations, generated national newspaper and television coverage and dramatically demonstrated the courage of the people in the movement and the gruesome violence of the white resistance." In an editorial in the *Meridian Star*, Thurman Sensing, an official with a local group called the Southern Industrial Council, expressed the sense of alarm provoked by the Freedom Riders: "Nothing in the American experience has prepared the nation for the invasion of the State of Mississippi now in progress by youths trained and organized by the National Council of Churches and the Student Non-Violent Coordinating Committee."

*Meridian* was a frequent stopover for the Freedom Riders, and the fury of the white mobs waiting to greet them and the level of invective hurled at them were no less intense than in Jackson and Birmingham. Typically, the students were not allowed to leave their buses at the downtown Trailways bus terminal; police cleared the waiting rooms and formed a *cordon sanitaire* around the station to squelch any gatherings of local black residents who showed up to express their solidarity and get a glimpse of the earnest-looking white and black students from up north.

The Freedom Riders sent shock waves throughout Mississippi and the federal government. President John F. Kennedy sought to placate civil rights leaders and avoid a collision between the activists and segregationists. According to Dittmer, "The president and his brother were convinced that strong federal support for civil rights activists would bring on another civil war in Mississippi, with dire consequences for the South and the nation." Meanwhile, even some black citizens were conflicted over the

massive influx of students and activists into the state. The Klan was still active, and fear remained a powerful disincentive to cooperate with groups like the Council of Federated Organizations (COFO), the Congress of Racial Equality (CORE), and SNCC in their campaigns against Mississippi apartheid.

By July 1961, Attorney General Robert Kennedy had filed two suits in Mississippi charging that black citizens had been denied the right to vote. The lawsuits were the first salvos in the widening battle for voting rights in the state, which would culminate in passage of the 1964 Civil Rights Act. But the years leading up to the historic voting rights legislation were pockmarked with mounting incidents of mayhem and resistance to federal oversight. Church bombings, mysterious shootings, voter registration rallies interrupted by gunfire, bloody attempts to integrate white swimming pools—Mississippi was caught up in what seemed to be a never-ending ruckus over racism.

Meridian's white civic and business leaders received at least one vote of confidence, however, in January 1962, when an official of the Dale Carnegie Institute who had traveled extensively in South Africa urged them to stay the course. According to the *Meridian Star*, Dr. Stewart McLelland told the weekly meeting of the all-white Kiwanis Club that the United States and Mississippi should continue to stand firm on segregation, following the role model of South Africa. "The Republic of South Africa is a friend of the U.S. and we need to retain that friendship," McLelland advised the politicians and businessmen. He went on to describe the unique position of whites in South Africa and explained that the country was blessed with total segregation. For those unfamiliar with the South African predicament, the learned professor explained that the country had been originally settled by whites and that the blacks had moved in later. Blacks were simply unable and unqualified to compete with whites economically, McLelland asserted; therefore it followed that voting rights for blacks were simply unthinkable.

Many local leaders were nonetheless desperately seeking an easing of the tensions precipitated by the expanding civil rights movement, the activities of the Freedom Riders, the increasing attention of the federal government, and the activism of Martin Luther King Jr. But any hope of détente between the civil rights activists and the segregationists was dashed in 1963 with the assassination of Medgar Evers, the state field secretary of the NAACP, who was gunned down in the driveway of his home in Jack-

son. Evers had predicted that Mississippi would become the focus of intensified movement activity. In a twist of fate, his death accelerated that activity, prompting organizations such as CORE and SNCC to wage an all-out war against Mississippi segregation.

Meridian had been a peripheral target in 1961 when the Freedom Riders started passing through en route to Jackson (the state capital) and Birmingham. But the city was now directly in the crosshairs of the movement as it geared up for what would become known as Freedom Summer.



Meridian had been an important railroad town during the Civil War and served as the temporary state capital when Jackson was occupied by Union troops. Author Earl Bailey described the town's growth: "From the beginning, railroads and railroad men dominated Meridian's development. Merging rails had given the town an excuse for being, and one of its co-founders, a pioneer railroad man, then gave the town its name, which he meant to be synonymous with 'junction.'" The city's location in east central Mississippi, near the Alabama line, away from the main battlefields in Vicksburg and Jackson, had spared it from complete destruction by Grant's forces, though the Union Army general did order the demolition of the town's rail facilities and other buildings.

Four railways, two airline services, four bus lines, eight major freight lines, one major petroleum pipeline, and a network of three national and three state highways added to the city's sense of centrality. City leaders called Meridian the "Queen City" and the "Heart of the South," expressing pride that it was a place where life was slow and religion and faith were treasured. Sports enthusiasts and hunters reveled in the city's outlying forests, lakes, and parks.

Nevertheless, Meridian had fallen on hard times by the second half of the twentieth century. As journalist Jack Nelson observed: "At its zenith a bustling rail junction, retail and marketing hub for cotton and lumber, downtown Meridian by the 1960s was parched and down at the heels. The streets were nearly devoid of trees. Weeds poked through cracks in the sidewalk. . . . The once-elegant hotels, which had accommodated hundreds of travelers at night and boasted of their sumptuous dining rooms, now were vacant and sad."

Until the early 1960s, the city's whites and blacks existed in a kind of

uneasy mutual dependence: they were bound together by the land and by a tradition of peonage that largely excluded brazen racism, though segregation in public accommodations was a fact of life. Blacks had always worked for stores and other businesses in Meridian, but those jobs had been on the docks and in the storerooms; no one was waited on by a black clerk at the downtown Woolworth's or Kress store. Blacks began breaching the old rules of social etiquette, however, by seeking service at restaurants such as Weidmann's in downtown Meridian, on Twenty-second Avenue. On one occasion during the long, torrid summer of 1964, three black patrons entered this century-old steak house and were turned back at the door by the manager, Thomas (Shorty) McWilliams, who told them, "We can't accommodate you."

Freedom Summer also stirred the city's Ku Klux Klan network, which encompassed nearby Neshoba and Newton counties. The ever-vigilant *Meridian Star* fretted over the coming onslaught on the state's way of life and the "horrors of integration," lamenting: "Truly Mississippi has come upon evil days; we have been delivered into the hands of the Philistines."



Michael (Mickey) Schwerner and his wife, Rita, native New Yorkers in their early twenties, arrived in Meridian on January 19, 1964, to work for CORE and COFO, the two groups coordinating movement activities in the state. The couple's first stop in Mississippi was Jackson, where civil rights leader Bob Moses briefed them on their assignment: Mickey and Rita were the first white civil rights activists dispatched from the capital to set up a permanent base in Meridian. As the second largest city in the state, Meridian was seen as strategically important in the overall southern civil rights campaign.

Schwerner was an intense young man with large eyes, an infectious grin, and a goatee; he was always dressed in sweatshirts, jeans, and sneakers. He and Rita, a serious woman with a kind face and reddish brown hair, finally found a place to live in a tiny four-bedroom house at 1308 Thirty-fourth Avenue, although the landlord was initially reluctant to rent to them because of their movement connection. Despite death threats and police intimidation, the Schwerners settled in and found office space for the campaign at 2505 1/2 Fifth Street, a run-down suite of rooms above the Fielder and Brooks drugstore. Mickey told his colleagues in CORE,

“Mississippi is the decisive battleground for America. Nowhere in the world is the idea of white supremacy more firmly entrenched or more cancerous than in Mississippi.”

The newly christened Meridian Community Center became a model Freedom Summer office, containing a small library, a recreation room, and a conference room where the Schwerners conducted voter registration classes. Mickey began canvassing the city for volunteers, but many black residents at first distrusted the whites who had suddenly appeared in their neighborhoods—they didn’t want any trouble or attention from the police or the Klan. Soon, though, one of the boys from a nearby neighborhood started hanging out at the center, volunteering to help Mickey and Rita put up bookshelves, paint walls, and set up meetings for those brave enough to learn about their voting rights. His name was James (J. E.) Chaney, and he immediately threw himself into the movement.

Chaney, a slender youth known as a loner, was one of five children from a broken home. He had been a rebel and a troublemaker from an early age, when officials at Harris High School reprimanded him for wearing hand-crafted NAACP buttons. Chaney had also unwittingly joined one of the first Freedom Rides in 1962, when he boarded a Trailways bus in Tennessee and sat next to one of the new breed of civil rights activists who were challenging segregation on the highways. When the bus arrived in Meridian, Chaney’s father pulled him off and away from the threat of arrest and attack by segregationists milling around the station. Now Chaney jumped at the opportunity to help Mickey and Rita and told his mother, who expressed concern about his involvement, that he had finally found a way to make a difference.

In addition to setting up the community center, Mickey was charged with the task of integrating at least one of the city’s downtown stores. He and Chaney and a handful of black residents began passing out leaflets calling for sales jobs for blacks at the city’s major stores: Kress, Woolworth’s, and J. J. Newberry. Police arrested Schwerner after he led a boycott of downtown businesses, but he was quickly released. The city’s power structure wanted to deflect any adverse publicity; the mayor and business leaders believed that the “outside agitators” would go away if they were ignored.

Meanwhile, Klansmen in Meridian and surrounding Lauderdale County had taken notice of Schwerner and resolved to eliminate him. “The Jew-boy with the beard at Meridian” and his wife were seen as race

mixers, who were threatening to upset the balance of power in the city, where blacks had always known their place in the shadows. The Klansmen closely monitored Schwerner's movements and planned to murder him when he ventured outside the Meridian city limits. Sooner or later, they hoped, Schwerner would want to reach out to rural blacks in one of the nearby counties. When he crossed the city line—into nearby Neshoba or Newton County, where the Klan operated with impunity—they would be waiting.

On Sunday, June 21, 1964, Schwerner, Chaney, and Andrew Goodman, a Freedom Summer volunteer who had been in Meridian for just a little more than twenty-four hours, set off to investigate the burning of a black church in nearby Neshoba County, about twelve miles east of the town of Philadelphia, in the Longdale community. Goodman was a handsome and gregarious college student from New York City. Along with Schwerner and Chaney, he was fresh from a three-day volunteer orientation and training session at the Western College for Women in Oxford, Ohio; now he was eager to hit the ground in Mississippi. He sat in the back seat of a blue Ford Fairlane station wagon with Chaney at the steering wheel and Schwerner poring over a map in the front passenger seat.

Schwerner had informed CORE officials and the FBI agent assigned to Meridian of the trio's trip to the site of the church bombing. Normally, he checked in with the movement office after completing a trip. But by that Sunday evening, CORE and COFO officials in Meridian and Jackson had not heard from the men and reported their disappearance.

Over the next few days, Meridian became the center of the civil rights movement. Helicopters and sailors from the Meridian naval station searched the thirty-mile stretch between the city and Philadelphia, Mississippi; FBI agents trudged through thickets near the area where the men had last been seen; and camera crews from the major television networks filled the hotels in Meridian. President Lyndon Johnson told a news conference in Washington that he was keeping in touch with the FBI as they scoured the search area and that agents would do everything possible to find the missing men. Neshoba County Chief Deputy Sheriff Cecil Price told the FBI that he had arrested the men Sunday afternoon for speeding but had released them at around ten thirty that evening. Price told investigators that he had watched the Ford station wagon disappear down Highway 19 South on the way to Meridian. Price's boss, Sheriff Lawrence

Rainey, disavowed any knowledge of what had happened to the men and speculated that they had left the state.

Nearly three months of intensive searches and national and international scrutiny finally yielded the bodies of the three men, buried beneath an earthen dam about six miles southwest of Philadelphia. Investigators would later learn the awful truth of what had happened to the civil rights workers after they were released from the jail in Philadelphia. Deputy Sheriff Price had delivered them into the hands of fellow Klan members, who drove them to Rock Cut Road, on the outskirts of Meridian. Schwerner was shot and killed first; Goodman was executed next. Chaney apparently struggled with the posse before he was severely beaten and shot three times at close range. The Klansmen then used a bulldozer to bury the bodies beneath the tons of dirt in the dam.

Reaction in Mississippi and in Meridian to the murders ranged from defiance to ambivalence. Only a week after the bodies were unearthed, the *Meridian Star* reported that Governor Paul Johnson told a cheering crowd at the Neshoba County Fair in Philadelphia that the state “must outmaneuver those who would destroy us and our way of life.” Speaking two miles from the clay dirt pond where the slain civil rights workers were found, Johnson sent a message to the nation and the world, saying, “Our people are not going to be browbeaten and they’re not going to be run over.”

Months later, Sheriff Rainey and Deputy Price were charged with conspiracy in the murders. Although seven Klan members, including Imperial Wizard Sam Bowers and Price, were charged with federal civil rights violations and served prison terms ranging from three to six years, Rainey escaped punishment. The state of Mississippi never prosecuted anyone for the slayings. To the Meridian establishment, who had never wanted trouble from “outside agitators,” what happened to Schwerner, Goodman, and Chaney on the edge of Meridian might just as well have happened on the moon.

But the Klan had not finished terrorizing the city. Its members, at the urging of Sam Bowers, blamed Meridian’s prosperous Jewish community for recruiting the Freedom Riders and supporting the civil rights movement. In the same way that blacks and their churches and schools had been targets of the Klan’s bombing and arson campaign, Jews and their homes and synagogues now came under attack. The Klan’s main target was Meyer Davidson, a Meridian businessman from a prominent family. The

local police and the FBI advised him of the danger posed by the Klan; and, with his cooperation, they devised a plan to entrap a team of bombers who had been sent to Meridian to attack Davidson's home. On Saturday, June 29, 1968, the trap was sprung, and downtown Meridian exploded in a fusillade of bullets that left one of the would-be assassins dead and the other wounded. No law enforcement officers were killed, and the local Klan suffered a mortal blow.



People in Grandma's neighborhood, around Forty-fifth and Forty-sixth avenues in south central Meridian, felt sorry for the three murdered boys, but many were too preoccupied with their own survival to get really worked up about the murders. The neighborhood was pinned between the railroad tracks at the end of Forty-sixth Avenue and bordered by the muddy Sowashee Creek. It contained a smattering of ranch-style brick houses and a depressing abundance of shacks. Sidewalks were nonexistent in the neighborhood; well-worn paths connecting the community of run-down houses complemented the barely paved streets.

With a few exceptions, including Grandma's house, most homes in this neighborhood lacked indoor plumbing and electricity. As late as 1970, people could be seen hoisting huge metal pans to collect water from the communal pumps outside, which were invariably in marshy areas that attracted mosquitoes and flies. One of those pumps was right across the street from Grandma's house, and it drew constant foot traffic. People took the water they collected back to the shacks and used it for drinking water, baths, laundry, and dishwashing. Many of the shacks contained claw-foot tubs, sometimes standing right in the kitchen, where it was not unusual to see children bathing, dishes being washed, and water being heated on a wood-burning stove for cooking and laundry.

Tending the stove was another source of worry for these families. From morning to evening, smoke belched from the rooftops and makeshift chimneys of the shacks. The massive black wood-burning stove had to be fed constantly to keep pace with the family's needs throughout the day. The person who drew stove duty had to be skillful in starting and maintaining the hearth. First thing in the morning, the fire had to be stoked using newspaper if the stove had grown cold overnight; then it took fresh kindling to get the pots boiling for grits or oatmeal and water for baths.

Loading the wood was tricky: every part of the hulking, cabinet-like stove could burn fingers or other body parts. The doors in its belly were pried open with a steel rod, and the pieces of wood were rammed inside.

Once the day began—the baths taken and the breakfasts of eggs, grits, bacon, and skillet bread consumed—many of the grown-ups went to work in the slaughterhouses, stockyards, and timber mills around Meridian and Lauderdale County. The people who lived in the brick houses were either retired or worked as schoolteachers or low-level clerks in the city’s bureaucracy. Groups of freshly scrubbed children made the trek to Oakland Heights Elementary School. Others trudged across Fifth Street to Carver or Kate Griffin Junior High School, while high school students had to walk up to Fifth Street to catch the only bus to Meridian High School. The smallest children, those headed to Oakland Heights, had to make their way to school as best they could, without a bus; at this time of the morning, only the city garbage trucks, with black men swinging off their backs, were making their rounds in the neighborhood.

Few people in the neighborhood owned cars, other than those who lived in the brick houses. Every now and then, a rickety pickup truck rumbled along the stretch of shacks, with children piled in the back and the cab packed with three or four riders. But, for the most part, walking was the standard form of transportation. Men dressed in overalls and worn brogans carried lunch pails and made their way toward Fifth and Eighth streets, the main arteries into commercial and industrial Meridian. Women pushing shopping carts taken from the grocery stores on Eighth Street went about their daily errands. Meridian had no public transportation system, and taxis, which tended to hang out at the Trailways bus station, were a luxury few could afford.

There were no stores in the neighborhood. The nearest curb market was Garrett’s on Fifth Street, but the place stocked only chips, beer, candy, maybe some bologna or luncheon meat, and crackers. The major food stores were on Eighth Street—the IGA, the A&P, and a Winn-Dixie, if you were willing to travel a bit farther down the road to College Park Plaza. For a time, Grandma operated an eatery out of a one-room hut in her front yard at 4516 Third Street. She sold hot dogs, hamburgers, candy, cookies, soda pop, pickled pigs’ feet, boiled eggs, and other small treats. Everybody in the neighborhood knew they could always get a bottle of “Co-Cola” and a bag of peanuts at “Miss Alma’s” snack stand—and

sometimes they could get it on credit until the first or third of the month when the welfare and Social Security checks arrived.

People tended to congregate on their porches at the end of the day. Children did their homework, women shelled field peas or husked corn, men got caught up in card games of Spades or Tonk, passing around a bottle of beer or liquor. Much of the activity in the neighborhood was observed from those porches, reflected in the gossip:

*Honey, did you see what that child was wearing yesterday? She might as well justa showed her ass.*

*I heard Robert Earl and Carrie Ann was fighting again; they sho' do love to show out, don't they?*

*Did you hear about Clarence getting drunk and spending all his paycheck at the pool hall? I feel sorry for his wife, that po' woman.*

The evenings on the porches helped to make everyone, even the neighbors who lived in the brick houses with the fancy carports, feel connected. Everybody spoke to one another and kept up a constant dialogue on the state of affairs in the neighborhood.

Weekends were when the neighborhood came alive, especially if checks had just arrived. First thing Saturday morning, entire families trudged to the grocery stores to spend their precious money on cheap cuts of pork, ground beef, chicken, sugar, coal oil for the kerosene lamps, and big vats of lard for cooking. Many families grew their own vegetables behind their shacks, or they waited for one of the men pushing a wheelbarrow or cart overflowing with vegetables and fruit for sale to come around. Saturdays were also the days for doing laundry. After many trips to the water pump, women and children slaved over a big metal tub, running the clothes over the rough teeth of a wooden washboard. Those who could afford it made the trip to one of the washhouses on Forty-ninth Avenue or Fifth Street.

In the afternoon, the sweet and tangy smell of barbecue floated through the neighborhood. Ribs and chicken and sausage sizzled on old barrels sliced in half and fired with charcoal and lighter fluid. Wizeden old men supervised the barbecue, drinking beer or sharing a bottle of whiskey with buddies who happened by to shoot the breeze. The women sat around in lawn chairs, their job done after preparing great bowls of potato salad and jugs of Kool-Aid for the children, who played horseshoes in the dirt or hopscotch in the streets. Other families chose to fry up catfish, bass, or perch, along with french fries and hush puppies and okra.