

## My Civil Rights Journey

Contributed by Scott R. Hartblay, MSW

Last June I went to Mississippi. I'm not sure exactly why I had to go there. I've been teaching about America's treatment of African Americans for some years now. In one of my courses, "Human Oppression," I regularly use a video series entitled Eyes on the Prize.

This series presents the history of the Civil Rights Movement from 1954 to 1965. I watch these videos with my students each semester, each year, and never tire of them, never grow bored. And each semester, each year, watching the videos, I see something new--something I hadn't quite noticed before. I know the people so well now. And I know these little places in the South. They are exotic, scary for me; yet, so familiar. I am haunted by the people. And I am haunted by the places. Maybe that's why last June I decided that I had to go to Mississippi. After all the years, I had to go and see the places, and feel the spirits of the people whose stories I have lived.

Here are the images that constantly run through my mind: Emmett Till and 1954 in a dusty little town called Money, Mississippi. A 14-year-old boy from Chicago murdered for "talking fresh to a white woman." His cousin interviewed, "He talked fresh to a white woman." A banging on the door of Emmett's uncle's house in the middle of the night. "Where's the boy that done all that talking?" They took Emmett Till away that night. Emmett's mother grieving from Chicago. Emmett's funeral back in Chicago with miles and miles of mourners walking single file past Emmett's open casket. Emmett's mother wanted this open casket. "So that the whole world could see" what they had done to her son.

The sham of a murder trial in the nearby town of Sumner. "A Good Place to Raise a Boy," said the sign as you drove into the town. Maybe, a white boy. But it was a hopeless trial. An all white, all male jury. Mose Wright, Emmett's brave uncle, when asked to point out the man who came to his door that night, he pointed. Mose Wright, the sharecropper, wearing his best white shirt pointed at the white man in that Southern courtroom and said, "that he." Courageous Mose Wright. That's an image that I see.

The jury deliberated for an hour. When they marched back in, the all white, all male jury, announced their verdict: "not guilty." After, the two grinning murderers, kissed on their mouths by their wives, one of whom Emmett Till had talked fresh to. And two months later, those two defendants, fearless now, cocky now, immune to further prosecution, sold the story of how they had murdered Emmett Till. They sold the story to Look magazine for four thousand dollars. They killed 14-year-old Emmett Till in Money, Mississippi.

Another image from the videos and my own memory as a boy at English High School in Boston. Freedom Summer, 1964. James Chaney, Michael Schwerner. Two civil rights workers. One white. One black. One from the North. One from the South. Working for CORE: The Congress on Racial Equality. They were helping to register African Americans, Mississippi citizens, to vote--helping people to fulfill their constitutional right. Chaney and Schwerner were based in Meridian, but were driving to Philadelphia, Mississippi to organize residents for voter registration in Neshoba County. They attempted to establish a voter education center at a black Baptist church. The next day, the Ku Klux Klan went to the church and beat the members of the congregation for talking to these civil rights workers. Then they burned down the church.

There was a third young man whom fate would bring to Neshoba County that summer of 1964. A third young man whose name would become linked forever with the other two. "Chaney, Schwerner, and Goodman; the three missing civil rights workers." Andrew Goodman had been training in Ohio with other Freedom Summer volunteers. He was just a college boy from New York. From Ohio, he was sent south, to Meridian, to join Chaney and Schwerner. His very first assignment was to go with the two veteran civil rights workers to investigate the fire at the Baptist church. Their station wagon was spotted as they drove the narrow Mississippi road toward Philadelphia. After leaving the burned out church, they were arrested by the Ku Klux Klan sheriff for a supposed traffic violation. They were put into the local Neshoba County Jail in Philadelphia, but then, inexplicably, released at 10 o'clock at night. It was a plan, you see. Driving back to Meridian on the dark, Mississippi country road, they were cut off and surrounded by cars driven by local men, members of the Ku Klux Klan. These men felt that their way of life was being threatened by these three young civil rights workers; by all of the participants of Mississippi Summer, black and white, Northerners and Southerners. Their response was to beat and shoot and snuff out the young lives of Chaney, Goodman and Schwerner.

The grieving girl/woman wife, Rita Schwerner, young, composed, dignified, said, even then, "that it is only because two white men were killed along with Chaney is so much attention being paid to this crime. Black men are killed in the South all the time with hardly a ripple in the media." She had wisdom this girl/woman, even in grief. And at the funeral for James Chaney, little Ben Chaney, 10 years old, sobbing for his big brother, buried alone in Meridian.

And then there's another Southern trial. In the courtroom, someone captures the laughing sheriff and deputy sheriff in the Neshoba County Courthouse. Another picture for all the world to see. This time in Life magazine. Those are my images. Those are my memories.

So last June I finally went to Mississippi. I had to go to find a part of myself. I zigged and zagged in a rental car around the state to the towns that I knew so well: Meridian and Philadelphia and Sumner and Money, and the city of Jackson. My first stop is Meridian, to visit the grave of James Chaney. He is in a little cemetery on a deserted country dirt road far out of town. His gravestone is set far away from the others, but right up close to the road. James Chaney buried alone. It was the request of the families that they be buried together—Chaney and Schwerner. But Mississippi law wouldn't allow it. There had to be segregation even in death. But for the racists and haters, death hasn't been enough for James Chaney. In the years following the funeral, the haters would regularly journey out to the little cemetery to knock down James Chaney's gravestone—to overturn it. Finally, his brother had a thick metal frame and supports installed, welded and bolted to the back of the gravestone. It's hard to knock that stone over now. Still alone, James Chaney, buried by the edge of that lonely dirt road. I stand before his grave and take pictures for my students. No other visitors to this little cemetery on this hot Meridian afternoon. Everything is still. I stand before his grave and think of him. James Chaney in 1964. James Chaney who only wanted change, who only wanted justice, who only wanted the promises of our nation fulfilled. James Chaney murdered on a country road late at night in Mississippi. The cemetery seems like such a lonely place. I feel bad about having to leave James Chaney. I should stay longer and visit with him, and tell him about all the things that have happened since 1964; tell him about all the things that have changed in our country thanks to him. But I get ready to leave, and I search my pockets for something to leave him, something of mine. Before I go, I place my house key on top of his gravestone. He is always welcome.

From Meridian, I drive to Philadelphia. Just like they did, the three civil rights workers. I drive on the same road that Chaney, Goodman, and Schwerner took on that last day of their young lives. I drive into Philadelphia, a little town, a single main street. But then I see the Neshoba County Courthouse. And I know it, having seen it so many times on the black and white video. And, amazingly, on that very day that I finally get to Philadelphia there is a trial going on in the courthouse. A trial having to do with the murders of Chaney, Goodman, and Schwerner. During recent years some witnesses came forward, and finally identified the organizer of the murders. The Neshoba County secret that everyone knew is finally out. The organizer is a local man, a Ku Klux Klan member: Edgar Ray Killen. Eighty years old now. In the Neshoba County Courthouse there is justice delayed for Edgar Ray Killen. Justice delayed for over forty years, but justice nevertheless for Edgar Ray Killen.

And now, all these years later, they've all come back to Philadelphia for this trial. Little Ben Chaney is there. Mature now, no longer ten years old. No longer little. Still grieving, though. There, for his brother. And Rita Schwerner, Michael's young wife, is there. Different now, after all the years. More mature and older, and I don't want to see. And the mothers have come. Andrew Goodman's mother. Eighty-something years old. To have grieved all these years for her twenty-year-old son. Forever young, he is, in her heart. And James Chaney's mother, who tells about the last time that her son left home. And she talks as if it were just yesterday. And then she breaks down on the witness stand.

This time the jury, men and women, black and white, this time, find Edgar Ray Killen guilty, guilty, guilty. A few days later he is sentenced to sixty years in prison. But those years are behind him now. And later, leaving the Neshoba County courthouse, he is pushed in his wheelchair, having lived a full life, 80 years. He is pushed between the rows of the media people and photographers from all around the world, and as he goes down the line he swats at the cameras and lenses on either side, like a snake spitting. Still mean at 80.

And there is still more of Mississippi that I have to see. I leave Philadelphia and head for a town called Money. I last saw Money in 1954, on the black and white video. Then, the town was made up of just a few stores and some houses on a single main street.

It's a little crossroads of a town in the northwest corner of the state. This is an area of Mississippi known as the Delta. It is cotton country. Home of B.B. King and the blues. There is a reason that the blues originated in this Delta. Black people experienced much suffering here during slavery and Jim Crow and after. When you are the constant victim of oppression, sometimes the only answer is the music.

I need to go to Money to find Emmett Till. I look for the tiny dot that is Money on the AAA map. I find it not too far from Greenwood, a good-sized town. I'd read that Money is hard to find now. That there is not much left there. I take a left off of the two-lane black-top that I've been following toward Greenwood. The map shows that a long gravel road leading north should get me to Money. This road to Money seems endless to me. The tires of my rental car raise a white cloud of dust that spreads over the cotton plants growing in the fields on either side of the road. I start to wonder if I am going the wrong way and will end up in the middle of nowhere. And, again, I think of Chaney, Goodman, and Schwerner, and wonder how they felt on a road like this, in the dark, in Mississippi, in 1964. What courage they had. What courage they all had, those who fought for civil rights in the South in the early '60s.

And finally this long gravel road between the endless flat agricultural acres ends at a T-junction with a paved road. Right or left? I take a right and am soon on a bridge that crosses a brown, muddy river. And a little sign identifies the river: "The Tallahatchie River." I know this river. I have seen this river. This is the Tallahatchie River where they threw the body of 14-year-old Emmett Till after they were done with him. His body weighed down by a heavy metal cotton

gin fan, which was fastened to him with barbed wire. I take a left at the end of the bridge, and there before me is Money. And I am finally at the place that I have seen so many times in my classroom in Massachusetts. But it looks different now, this place. Almost all of the commercial buildings are gone from the little main street of the little town.

There is just one building left. I see it on the left. And I recognize it. It is the store. It is Emmett Till's store. It is still standing because it had been the only brick structure in the little town. But the front porch has collapsed, and the big store windows are covered with plywood. This was the store where the white woman had worked. Where Emmett Till from Chicago had gone one summer's day to buy some candy, and talked fresh to that white woman.

I pull the car over to the side and walk away from the store, down what was once the main street of Money. I am looking for the town. There appears to be nothing left of the buildings that had lined the street. I come to the United States Post Office. But this building was not here in 1954. It is a modern, long trailer, which I notice is handicap accessible. The little sign over the door says, "Money, Mississippi 38945."

Off in the distance I see one more building. It has the look of a large wooden barn. I walk toward it. Every few minutes a car whizzes by. Across the road from what was Money is a railroad track that parallels the road. A freight train slowly rumbles past. The engineer waves at me from the open window of his engine, and I wave back. I reach the barn-like structure, and am sure that it was there in 1954. Oh, yes, it is a big wooden building that has something to do with cotton harvesting. It looks like it is still active. I wonder if this building would have had a cotton gin. I walk around the back, and see all sorts of discarded metal industrial equipment lying about. And a little further back is the Tallahatchie River.

I walk back down Money's main street to see Emmett Till's building. It is in bad shape. I try to peer inside through a crack in the plywood. Except for some light coming through a hole in the roof, it is dim inside of that store and I can't see much. And I get no sense of what little, dusty, Money was like on a hot summer's day in 1954. For that I'll have to rely on the black and white video. And I look at this abandoned building, and think that it should not be allowed to fall down. Maybe this is what some Mississippians want. To be able to wipe out the past. To not have to think about, not admit, all the terrible things that had been done to African Americans—the murders, the lynchings, the beatings, the segregation and discrimination. They want to make the memories, the facts, go away. And, in fact, the years are taking care of that. Most of the town is gone. There is just this one remnant to remind us that once upon a time a 14-year-old boy came down from Chicago and had his life taken from him. This building should be refurbished and restored to the condition that it was in 1954. It should become a memorial to Emmett Till. And a plaque should be placed on the front describing what was done to Emmett Till in Money, Mississippi in 1954.

I stood there in front of the falling down store in Money, Mississippi and thought of Emmet Till in 1954, and thought of our country in 1954. Then I went over to the bridge to gaze down at the slow-moving, muddy, Tallahatchie River, and thought that memorials and signs need to go up all over the South, honoring and remembering all those who had suffered at the hands of hate and injustice. These signs and memorials need to be there for all of us, for our nation, and for our children and their children. Last June, I finally went to Mississippi.

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