

Freedom Summer Tragedy: How Three Young Boys Deaths Spurred the President, the FBI, the Media, and the American People to Notice the Civil Rights Movement

By Kelly Sinnott

Had 21-year-old James Earl Chaney been driving by himself that June evening in 1964 on lonely Highway 19 in the heart of Neshoba County, Mississippi, perhaps the events following the tragedy would be radically different. Had Chaney been all alone that evening, what is about to be discussed would likely have never made enough of a splash to ever be analyzed or critiqued. The FBI would likely not have investigated the murder; President Johnson surely would not have been involved; the national media might not have clamored to cover the story; the trials of 18 Klansmen would not have been carried out, and the Oscar-nominated film *Mississippi Burning* probably would have never been made. Fortunately for the civil rights movement and future history classes, Chaney was not alone that night. He was with two other men: 24-year-old Michael Schwerner, and 20-year-old Andrew Goodman. What difference did it make that these two men were in the 1963 blue Ford Fairlane station wagon with Chaney that night? It was quite simple: Schwerner and Goodman were white, upper class, New Yorkers, and Chaney was black and from Meridian, Mississippi. In ardently racist Neshoba County, Mississippi, that simple fact made all the difference. Schwerner's wife Rita made the following statement shortly after her husband's death,

My husband, Michael Schwerner, did not die in vain. If he and Andrew Goodman had been Negroes, the world would have taken little notice of their deaths. After all, the

slaying of a Negro in Mississippi is not news. It is only because my husband and Andrew Goodman were white that the national alarm had been sounded.¹

Harsh as the statement may sound, in 1964 it rang true. During the subsequent investigation into the murders of the three boys, several other bodies of black lynching victims were found, and yet none of them received the same amount of coverage or thorough investigations. Because the trio's killings did receive so much media coverage, they became a jumping-off point for the civil rights movement, and a chance for the Justice Department's John Doar to win the first-ever conviction in a civil rights case in Mississippi. This case made it impossible for white citizens to ignore what was going on. It convinced them of the importance of the civil rights movement, and the reality that it affected whites, as well as blacks.

Using Mississippi newspaper articles from both 1964 and present day (including *The Neshoba Democrat* and *The Clarion-Ledger*), gives insight as to what the community was like, and the feelings and thoughts of Mississippians about the disappearances and the unearthing of the bodies. Online historical archives of civil rights organizations and governmental offices provide background about Freedom Summer and the Mississippi Summer Project. The secret White House tapes of President Lyndon Johnson and a biography of LBJ/Martin Luther King are used for crucial details about what happened shortly after the boys' disappearance. Douglas Linder's extensive research on the subsequent trial provides much of the legal framework. Other various resources, including accounts from Northern journalists, records from the Mississippi State Sovereignty Commission, and interviews with those close to the victims fill in the holes, and add some personal insights by those who lived through the ordeal.

By taking a look back at what was happening in Mississippi that summer, how the President and the FBI got involved, the way the investigation proceeded, and how the media covered the case, we can come to understand the importance of the three young boys tragic

deaths, how it impacted civil rights during the summer of 1964, and the lingering impact still felt today as one of the men involved in the slaying is finally put to trial.

Freedom Summer and the Mississippi Summer Project

The summer of 1964 was to be known as Freedom Summer to the volunteers of the Mississippi Summer Project, a voter registration drive coordinated by various civil rights groups to improve the rights of African-Americans in Mississippi. Over 1,000 volunteers worked from various civil rights organizations such as the Congress on Racial Equality (CORE), the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP) and the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee (SNCC). This was the first time a large number of whites became involved in civil rights organizations. Robert Moses, director of the Mississippi Summer Project, had brought hundreds of white students to the program over the objections of many black staffers. His motives for involving the white students were loud and clear; he wanted, "...to produce a confrontation between federal and state authorities that could not be ignored, precipitating a crisis that finally would force the federal government to protect civil rights and Mississippi's black citizens who were trying to register to vote."² The white students involved felt the cause to be just as important to them as the black volunteers.

The Mississippi Summer Project was certainly no ordinary summer vacation, or for the faint of heart. Before going to Mississippi, the students had to raise \$500 bail money, list their next of kin, and be photographed with an identification number across their chest (so they may be identified, in case of death).³ Some used money from graduation or vacation money to fund their trip. One volunteer even arrived on what was to be her wedding day, she had left the groom-to-be at the altar after finding his views on civil rights were not exactly matched with her own.⁴ A white girl who was a senior at Southern Illinois University in Carbondale volunteered

because, “I feel segregation is morally wrong. I believe that if we don’t help to right the wrong, our democracy may wither away.”⁵ Before leaving, Andrew Goodman told his mother he wanted to go to Mississippi, “...because it’s the most important thing going on in the country.”⁶

The program was aimed at registering voters in Mississippi, where the African American population exceeded 45%, and only 6% were actually registered to vote.⁷ African-Americans that at least tried to register risked not only their jobs, but their lives. Many were intimidated by menacing phone calls made in the middle of the night promising to either kill, or severely harm anyone who tried to register, and their family as well. Due to the state’s lack of care for these types of cases or the desire to prosecute and convict anyone, the reign of terror established by the whites in the state worked exceptionally well. It was the desire of the Project volunteers to assist blacks wanting to register in any way they could; but their resources could not provide protection for those willing to try.

Another goal of the Project was to establish hundreds of summer schools in Mississippi to try and counteract the state's unequally-funded school system. With no compulsory education laws, the average black child only attended school for six years, and cost the state less than half of what it spends to educate a white child.⁸ Named “freedom schools”, volunteers taught the curriculum, which included black history and the philosophy of the civil rights movement. One student of a “freedom school” said he had, “...learned more about Negro history in two days than he had in 11 years of public schools.”⁹ Students ranged in age from six to seventy-five years old, and traveled from all over the counties of Mississippi to soak up the knowledge the “freedom schools” offered to anyone willing to listen. For some, it was the first time they had ever attended any schooling, and others had partial college educations, yet all were eager to learn.

The young idealists of the Mississippi Summer Project were determined to make a difference in one of the country's most racially divided states, but the mounting tensions at the time were culminating to an inevitable major act of violence, such as the killings of the three civil rights workers. The Mississippi State Sovereignty Commission, a now defunct state-run spy agency, monitored activists throughout the state and worked in conjunction with the White Citizens Council to keep black citizens at the bottom of Mississippi society through economic threats and intimidation.¹⁰ Between 1956 and 1977, the agency collected information and details on many Klan murders and contained about 87,000 names in their records.¹¹ Three months before Schwerner's death, the agency began surveillance on the Schwerners at their home in Meridian. They knew where he lived, where he worked, what he drove, who he talked with and when.¹² One of the Commission's agents even informed the Commission of the details of Schwerner's fateful June 21st trip, including arrival information, license plate number, route, and destination.¹³ The information was given to local law enforcement officers in Neshoba County and members of the Klan.

The Ku Klux Klan had regained power in the southern half of Mississippi recently, primarily because of the Klan's close ties to local law enforcement. With over 10,000 Klan members in Mississippi in 1964, the KKK fragrantly displayed its power with 61 simultaneous cross burnings across the state on April 24.¹⁴ More than 16 murders fueled by racial motives occurred in the state during 1964.¹⁵ The sheriff of Neshoba County, Lawrence Rainey, had won his position on the campaign slogan, "The man who can cope with the situations that might arise," which was a flimsily veiled threat to the "racial agitators" planning to invade the state in 1964.¹⁶ The Klan of Neshoba County, which included Sheriff Rainey and Deputy Sheriff Cecil Price, had initiated a fear campaign against the blacks of Mississippi and anyone willing to help

the blacks. R. Jess Brown, one of the few lawyers in Mississippi who would take a civil rights case on, warned the volunteers during training that, “They—the white folk, the police, the county sheriff, the state police—they are all waiting for you, they are looking for you. They are ready; they are armed. They know some of your names and your descriptions even now, even before you get to Mississippi. They know you are coming, and they are ready.”¹⁷ Politicians and law enforcement officers alike prepared for the flock of agitators about to invade their state. The mayor of Jackson purchased an armored car and stocked it with shotguns and tear gas.¹⁸ The Mississippi State Sovereignty Commission assigned one of its agents solely to report on the incoming students and their activities, and racial hate groups sprung up everywhere around Mississippi. Besides the Klan and the White Citizens Council, Americans for the Preservation of the White Race also flourished during this time.

Prior to sending volunteers into the battlefield that was Mississippi, Robert Moses and parents of the volunteers sent a June 14 wire that asked President Johnson and the federal government to take action before any violence happened.¹⁹ No extra FBI personnel or any sort of protection were sent to Mississippi. Yet at the same time in Neshoba County, workshops were being held by doctors and undertakers on how to kill without leaving behind evidence and how to properly dispose of the bodies.²⁰ Their prime example of what not to do: Emmett Till. Over the course of Freedom Summer, three other bodies of murdered black men were found, 80 beatings took place, and over 1,000 arrests of activists were made.²¹ Just within the week after the disappearances, five bomb threats were made in McComb, a hall used for registration was set on fire by a white man in Moss Point, a black minister’s home was shot at in Jackson, and two reporters were chased from Ruleville to Greenwood.²² So precarious was the situation in Mississippi, that John Doar, a representative of the Justice Department, warned Mississippi

Summer Project volunteers that the federal government would not be able to provide them with protection and emphasized that local and state officials held the responsibility for maintaining law and order.²³ Considering the track record local law enforcement had of protecting such workers, this warning was particularly meaningful, and another ominous foreshadowing of what was to come.

Training for volunteers was held at the Western College for Women, in Oxford, Ohio, in late June. Schwerner and Chaney, who had both been active with CORE for about six months, were at the Ohio campus, along with brand-new recruit, Andrew Goodman, a college student from Queens. Chaney was a native of Mississippi, and had been a volunteer at the CORE office in Meridian for the past year. At 24 years old, Schwerner was already a veteran of the movement, and had been living in Meridian with his wife Rita for almost six months. Goodman was the rookie of the bunch and had only joined the Project a week before the ill-fated trip into Mississippi. On June 16, Mt. Zion Church in Longdale, Mississippi, a rural Neshoba County town, was bombed by the Klan in an attempt to kill Schwerner.²⁴ Mt. Zion was only one of 20 black churches bombed in Mississippi that summer.²⁵ Upon hearing the news, the three boys took off in a CORE-owned station wagon and headed to Longdale to investigate the bombing and express their condolences. On their way back from the church they were pulled over by Deputy Sheriff Cecil Price and held for suspicion of arson at the Neshoba County Jail. During FBI investigation and court testimony, it was discovered that during this time Price alerted local Klan kleagle Edgar Ray Killen of the catch he had waiting in a jail cell. Plans were made to meet up with the boys upon their release for some “butt ripping,” as Killen put it.²⁶ The boys were held at the jail, unable to make a phone call, and denied requests for contact with anyone, until almost 10 p.m. Upon release from the jail, the boys were followed, cornered onto a lonely

back highway, and executed. The car was burned and found four days later near a swamp about 13 miles from Philadelphia. Their bodies were buried in an earthen dam located on the grounds of Old Jolly Farm, owned by Klansman Owen Burrage, and it would take 44 days for the FBI to uncover them.

The Investigation and Politics

When the three boys did not check in with the local Meridian office by the scheduled time, alarm bells began to go off throughout the civil rights network. One key procedure that was followed by nearly every civil rights worker in the South was to keep the home organization informed of their every step.²⁷ Once the boys missed their 4 p.m. arrival time, volunteers were on the phone calling every local hospital, jail, and civil rights contact in the Mississippi area, hoping to uncover their whereabouts. Louise Hermey, who worked at the Council of Federated Organization's (COFO) office in Meridian, called the Neshoba County Jail that night, and was told the boys were not there, when in fact they were. As night quickly turned into day, the worst fears of the volunteers were slowly coming to realization. Rather than dwell on what might have happened to the boys, Moses and the rest of the COFO leaders quickly sprung into action, and barely 24 hours had passed before Attorney General Robert Kennedy had ordered an FBI investigation under the Lindbergh kidnapping statute.²⁸

If the local Klan members had hoped to intimidate local student volunteers or stop the movement from progressing, their hopes were quickly dashed. The murders only spurred the movement, and caused a national public outrage at lawlessness in Mississippi, the likes of which had not been seen before. The families of Goodman and Schwerner were upper class liberal New Yorkers who demanded action. Both Congressman William Fitts Ryan and Representative Ogden Reid of New York traveled to Washington, D.C., with Goodman's parents and

Schwerner's father, and demanded a meeting with President Johnson.²⁹ LBJ was somewhat agitated by this news, because he was in the middle of pushing passage of the 1964 Civil Rights Act through the House, and had just passed it in the Senate four days prior. He knew this story could be damaging to his reputation if he just ignored it and let it play out on its own. Suddenly LBJ was put on the spot to prove he was as passionate about civil rights as he claimed he was, and not just another Southern politician.

LBJ expanded the investigation into the disappearance by prodding J. Edgar Hoover, by seeking advice from Cabinet officers and congressional leaders, and by involving the Defense Department (eventually bringing in hundreds of sailors to scour the countryside, particularly its swampy areas where it was presumed bodies might have been hidden).³⁰

Allen Dulles, former head of the CIA, was sent to meet with Governor Johnson of Mississippi as an impartial observer and to placate the civil rights leaders who were continually hounding him. The FBI, despite some reluctance from Hoover, made this case [codenamed MIBURN (Mississippi Burning)] its top priority. Joseph Sullivan, the FBI's major case inspector was assigned to head up the investigation, which furthermore proved the importance that had been placed upon this case. The case was not without hardship though. Most of the residents of Neshoba County had either participated somehow in the conspiracy or they knew of it, and were not willing to talk. Fear of what would happen to the traitor who spilled the beans kept the majority of people quiet. Investigators often ran into the "Cotton Curtain" of silence. Sullivan found that children provided some of the most useful information and he would fill his pockets with candy before setting out for the day.³¹ For most of July, federal agents, along with hundreds of sailors, toiled at searching for the bodies and getting witnesses to talk. Their efforts were not helped by a statement made to the press from Mississippi Senator, James Eastland, on July 22,

An intensive, month-long investigation and search had failed to produce ‘a shred of evidence’ that the three were victims of racial violence...I think the people of America will be justified in considering other alternatives more valid solutions to the mystery, instead of accepting as true the accusation of the agitators that heinous crime has been committed.³²

Many of the reports from the Mississippi State Sovereignty Commission hint at the same idea that the disappearance was simply a hoax being put on by the civil rights agitators and the missing trio.

A \$30,000 reward offered by the FBI was eventually tempting enough to an anonymous source who passed along information concerning the whereabouts of the bodies. Acting on the informant’s tip, on August 4, 1964, Sullivan and other FBI agents began to excavate an earthen dam on Old Jolly Farm. They found three bodies. After digging up the bodies, the reports from the medical examiner stated the gruesomeness of the deaths to be worse than thought. Dr. David Spain, who examined the bodies of Schwerner and Chaney after the Mississippi examiner did, said, “It was obvious to any first-year medical student that this boy had been beaten to a pulp.”³³ Chaney suffered from two broken arms, trauma to the groin area, a broken jaw, and crushed right shoulder. None of this was brought as evidence during the 1967 trials, because the pathologist who conducted the original autopsies declared that damage done to Chaney’s body was the result of the bulldozer used to uncover the bodies, and no one questioned his testimony.³⁴ He also testified that he could not state the cause of death or rule out self-poisoning as a cause of death.³⁵ Dr. Spain, other present-day medical examiners, and the FBI agents who were at the dam all dispute that possibility. The fact that Chaney was beaten more severely than the others is an example of the classic mob mentality of the Klan. Many African-American lynching victims, from Emmett Till, to the victims of Moore’s Ford Bridge, were all severely beaten before they

were killed. Neither Schwerner nor Goodman showed any signs of trauma or injury comparable to Chaney's.

Reactions among Mississippians were mixed. There were those who proclaimed they could never imagine anyone in Mississippi carrying out such a gruesome deed. These were mostly the genteel, upper class Mississippians, who pretended that racial tensions did not even exist. Many other whites were appalled, although not at the discovery of the bodies, but that someone had tipped off the FBI. "Somebody broke our code. No honorable white man would have told you what happened," said one such Mississippian to the FBI.³⁶ For years to come, men who were thought to be Mr. X (The FBI code name for the informant) were threatened, received menacing phone calls, and snubbed by their fellow neighbors. His identity was never revealed, and Joseph Sullivan, who zealously guards the secret, plans to take it with him to the grave.³⁷ Blacks in Mississippi were simply pleased that people were finally paying attention to their strife. "I'm sorry the three fellows is dead, but five of us that we know about have been killed this year and nobody raised any hell about it. Now two white boys is dead and all the world come running to look and see."³⁸

For the civil rights leaders, conducting an investigation or even being in the town of Philadelphia was not met with much approval from the locals. Two days after the disappearance, an interracial group of lawyers were shoved, insulted, and threatened by a group of whites outside the courthouse and inside the sheriff's office.³⁹ When a group of 16 civil rights workers came to Philadelphia, they were told it would not be useful for them to view the burned car of the three boys, or for the group to visit the damaged church site.⁴⁰ The County Attorney had each member of the group write down his or her names and addresses, and the information was printed in *The Neshoba Democrat*.⁴¹ Mayor Ab Davis Harbour of Philadelphia, made a public

statement to the press about more civil rights workers coming to his town, “They can do irreparable damage to the friendly relations that exist among all of our people, and regardless of how well-meaning their intentions might be, such activities tend to create tension among the citizens of our city and state.”⁴² Many of the numerous editorials written by Jack Tannehill, editor and publisher of *The Neshoba Democrat* at the time, revealed a thinly veiled politeness toward visiting law enforcement, civil rights workers, and media, and mentioned numerous times over and over again that it was almost shameful that Philadelphia should be known for only this, as it had much more to offer.

One final blow to the blacks in Philadelphia and to James Chaney’s mother, Fannie Lee Chaney, was the impossibility of Chaney and Schwerner being buried together. The parents had wished for the two boys to be buried together in the Chaney family plot, but the black funeral home operator refused to do it, for fear of losing his license.⁴³ The Schwerners were unable to find any white undertaker who would transport their son’s body to a Negro cemetery and the two were buried separately to the chagrin of both boys’ parents.

Legal Justice

On December 4, 1964, nineteen men from Neshoba and Lauderdale counties were arrested for conspiring to deprive Goodman, Chaney, and Schwerner of their civil rights under color of state law.⁴⁴ Federal Judge William Harold Cox, who was once reprimanded by a higher court for calling black plaintiffs “a bunch of chimpanzees”, threw out the original case because seventeen of the men had not acted “under color of state law.”⁴⁵ After the Supreme Court overruled Cox in 1966, and a new grand jury won re-indictments on February 28, 1967, the trial for eighteen different Klansmen commenced in October of 1967. Incredibly enough, Judge Cox presided over the trial, with an all-white jury of seven men and five women.

Much of the testimony for the prosecution came from Klan informants, like Delmar Dennis and James Jordan, who testified on the details of Klan meetings; secret letters from Sam Bowers, the founder and Imperial Wizard of the White Knights of the KKK of Mississippi; and details of what occurred during the slayings.⁴⁶ Because Jordan was the only witness who was testifying about the actual killings, government protection was assigned to him at all times. Jordan was so nervous, for fear of retaliation by the Klan, he was hospitalized after hyperventilating, and collapsed and was carried out of the courtroom by stretcher.⁴⁷

After almost three weeks of testimony, the jury returned their verdicts on October 27, 1964. Seven of the defendants were found guilty, including Deputy Sheriff Cecil Price and Imperial Wizard Sam Bowers. Eight of the men were acquitted of all charges, including Sheriff Lawrence Rainey and Olen Burrage, the owner of the burial site. For three of the men, the jury was unable to reach a verdict, one of whom was Edgar Ray Killen. Willie Arnesen, a secretary from Meridian, was the one juror who held out, and allowed Killen to walk free for almost 40 years.⁴⁸ She told others on the panel she could never vote guilty against Edgar Ray Killen, because she could not convict a preacher. One juror recalled her saying, "I'm not going to find Brother Killen guilty. I don't believe it. He wouldn't do such a thing. I'll stay here till Christmas."⁴⁹

When the sentences were handed out by Judge Cox that December, none of the defendants received more than a ten-year sentence. Deputy Sheriff Cecil Price received a six-year sentence and only served four. When explaining his sentences, Judge Cox said, "They killed one nigger, one Jew, and a white man— I gave them all what I thought they deserved."⁵⁰ That would serve as the most punishment to come from this case until 2005, when Edgar Ray Killen was once again brought to trial, and this time charged with the murders of Chaney,

Schwerner, and Goodman. After a call for justice by The Philadelphia Coalition, a 30-member multi-racial group of local citizens, on the 40th anniversary of the slayings, State Attorney General Jim Hood and Neshoba County District Attorney teamed up to re-investigate the case.⁵¹ Jerry Mitchell, a reporter for *The Clarion-Ledger*, was instrumental in helping reopen the case. He spent much of the last 16 years going through records and files looking for information that could bring un-prosecuted civil rights cases back into a courtroom.

Media Coverage

During the investigation, not only was Neshoba County under the scrutiny of the FBI, the Justice Department, and civil rights organizations, but they were being closely watched by the national media as well. Hundreds of news media began pouring into Philadelphia shortly after the murders. Reporters from the Associated Press, United-Press International, the *New York Times*, *Chicago Tribune*, *Minneapolis Times*, *Newsweek*, *Life* magazine, CBS and NBC TV crews, and WDSU-TV from New Orleans all set up shop to report on the tragedy.⁵² Coverage of the tragedy was not just nationwide, but global. Comedian Dick Gregory, an African-American who was a civil rights activist as well, heard the news through the UPI in Moscow, Russia. Originally, the story was left untouched by the local news media. The June 16 bombing at Mt. Zion that caused the boys to drive to Mississippi in the first place was never even reported by *The Clarion-Ledger*. Records from the Mississippi Sovereignty Commission document the scheme to kill the story.⁵³ Stories for *The Clarion-Ledger* were often passed by the Commission first, or were snuffed out before publication if they did not approve. Word only got out nationally, because Bill Minor at the *Times-Picayune* in New Orleans received a tip, and his story made the AP wire.⁵⁴ His story triggered Schwerner, Chaney, and Goodman's trip to investigate.

When articles did run, they had little information about the investigation, and conveyed an air of nonchalance, and almost defiance. The following statement ended an article in the June 30, 1964 issue of *The Clarion-Ledger* in regards to all the commotion surrounding the disappearance; “Monday afternoon was like most Monday afternoons have been in Philadelphia for years. And Philadelphia will be here for many more Mondays to come.”⁵⁵ Not only did the papers not seem to care too much; but they ran editorials suggesting the disappearances was a hoax staged by the boys for publicity, and a number of Mississippians wrote letters to the editors charging a plot existed for Goodman to “become missing.”⁵⁶ In fact, Governor Paul Johnson himself jokingly made the comment to the press, “Governor Wallace and I are the only two people who know where they are and we’re not telling.”⁵⁷ Senator James Eastland continually pandered to the press about the disappearance being a hoax and the investigation was useless. Had the national media not got wind of the story, coverage of what happened during the investigation and subsequent trials would have been severely skewed and our perceptions of what happened could have been vastly different.

Although Oscar-nominated, and lauded for the effort it makes in bringing civil rights to the big screen, *Mississippi Burning* may very easily give false impressions to those who know nothing about the case. The portrayal of two white FBI agents as the heroes that cracked the case is greatly exaggerated, and the role of black citizens is almost completely eliminated. Some are hard pressed to believe the movie’s interpretation of the FBI, because J. Edgar Hoover was notorious for his dislike of the civil rights movement and was obsessed with bringing down Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. Although the FBI definitely deserves credit for its contribution, its role was one of many that helped to investigate the case and bring it to trial. The film does not portray it in the same manner, and it also reduces the context of the national outrage the murders

caused. As entertainment, the movie is excellent and presents a harsh reality of racist Mississippi in the 1960's; but used for anything other than that is to discredit the importance of the roles many people played and the national attention that was focused on the town.

The Impact Felt Today

Media coverage during the present-day trial of Edgar Ray Killen is somewhat fairer and balanced reporting, but a quick look at the editorial section in *The Clarion Ledger* shows that not all has changed. Letters in the June 17 edition of *The Clarion Ledger* lean toward support for Killen. One read, "Civil rights workers were communists...Civil rights did not do anything but destroy everything. God bless Brother Edgar Ray Killen," and another wrote, "This sounds more like the state trying to wash its conscience," with a third declaring that, "The trial will not be over until someone (Killen) is convicted, no matter what the evidence shows." A majority of Mississippians support the prosecution of Killen, and believe that this trial will help to finally close the door on a dark era of Mississippi history.

Despite the local media glossing over the events that happened in 1964, one is hard pressed today not to know the significance of what happened or how it changed history. Unlike other lynchings of the time, such as Emmett Till and the Moore's Ford Bridge lynching, knowledge of the case can be found in abundance. The MIBURN files are available to the public on the FBI's web site. A court order made the documents of the Mississippi State Sovereignty Commission public record and can be viewed by anyone. The holdings include everything from racist pamphlets and flyers and to an in-depth magazine article published the same year as the murders that lays out the entire story. The secret tapes of President Johnson in the White House can be downloaded, and conversations between LBJ and Hoover, Governor Paul Johnson of Mississippi, and Senator James Eastland show the White House involvement in

the case. Jerry Mitchell, a reporter at *The Clarion Ledger* in Jackson, Mississippi, was instrumental in process of re-opening the 1964 case. He wrote a series of articles in 2000, entitled, “44 Days that Changed Mississippi”. The articles uncovered new evidence, interviewed old suspects and family members of the victims, revealed new witnesses and previously sealed records, and ran editorials on the current feelings in Mississippi. *Mississippi Burning* can be rented or purchased by anyone with a VCR or DVD player, and the tourism department in Philadelphia has even put together an African-American heritage driving tour, “Roots of Struggle, Rewards of Sacrifice” (Neshoba County...). Sites on the tour include the Neshoba County Jail, the swamp where the car was found, the COFO office, and the Mt. Zion Church. Next to a rebuilt Mt. Zion church stands a simple plaque, which reads,

On June 21, 1964, voting rights activists James Chaney, Andrew Goodman and Michael Schwerner, who had come here to investigate the burning of Mr. Zion Church, were murdered. Victims of a Klan conspiracy, their deaths provoked national outrage and led to the first successful prosecution of a civil rights case in Mississippi.⁵⁸

All of these resources and memorials dedicated to the murders of the three young men prove that their murders were not ordinary and would not soon be forgotten.

Conclusion

The impact the case made in propelling the civil rights movement was invaluable. The media coverage generated by the murders brought the grisly truth of civil rights in the South to newspapers and television sets across the country. From Vermont to Montana, whites could no longer feign ignorance about what really happened in the South. By the end of that summer more blacks had been registered to vote in the state than ever before, the Mississippi Freedom Democratic Party had challenged the national system, and the next year the Voting Rights Act of 1965 was passed. The case was the first successful civil rights prosecution in the state of

Mississippi; and 40 years later, justice would fully be served with a 60-year sentence for Edgar Ray Killen. Investigations into the murders of Charles Moore and Henry Dee (the two bodies found in the Mississippi River during the search for the three boys) have recently commenced. Chaney's brother, Ben Chaney, established a foundation in his brother's name dedicated to civil rights. Goodman's mother, Dr. Carolyn Goodman, has given many speeches on civil rights. Despite all the positives that came from the tragedy, not everything has changed. The headstone of James Chaney's grave is marred by two recent bullet holes, and attempts have been made to dig up the grave and get to the coffin. Any mention of the slayings is still met with silence by most of Philadelphia's older residents; who would rather pretend the whole affair never happened. There is still feigned ignorance among those who were involved in the case or tried during the 1967 trial. Overall though, the community has come to realize that the past is not just the past and sins should be atoned for. Edgar Ray Killen is a start, but there are more cases unsolved and un-prosecuted in Neshoba County, and many more across the state of Mississippi. Jerry Mitchell has made it his mission to bring each and every one of these cases the chance for justice and to finally bring peace to any of those still alive who were involved with the cases as a victim, a perpetrator, or a silent bystander.

Phillip Martin, chief of the Mississippi Band of Choctaw Indians, summed up the whole affair from the community's perspective,

Forty years ago, three young men who ignored the walls of separation between our communities were sacrificed to the fears and hatreds that long simmered throughout our country. Forever since, Neshoba County has been associated with an act of infamy. However those three that we lost live among us today. While it is right to mourn them, we honor them more when we celebrate their lives for the positive changes they provided to all of us.⁵⁹

From the discovery of the burnt-out car, to whispered rumors of hoaxes, to the unearthing of the bodies, America and the world held their breath and then let out a collective gasp at the

atrocities that occurred by fellow men. In the matter of this case, justice unquestionably had to be served, and three years later the first civil rights convictions in Mississippi made history. Not everyone may have felt that justice was fairly doled out, and 40 years later, those people were pleased to find that the state of Mississippi would finally bring murder charges in the case and successfully convict one of the main perpetrators.

Whether conscience of it or not, every time someone enters a voting booth, or attends an integrated church service, or nonchalantly takes a moonlight stroll in Mississippi, a bittersweet remembrance of the sacrifices of the trio is made and their death's impact has made life better for an untold number of people. On June 21, 1964, Chaney, Goodman, and Schwerner had no intention of becoming martyrs, but that's exactly what happened as the entire country waited for 44 days to discover the fate of the three young boys. By putting a face to the injustices in Mississippi, those three boys will forever be remembered in not just Neshoba County, but in citizens both black and white across America.

¹“August 4, 1964: Three Civil Rights Activists Found Dead”

² Nick Kotz, *Judgment Days: Lyndon Baines Johnson, Martin Luther King Jr., and the Laws that Changed America*, pg 159

³ Louis Lomax, “The Road to Mississippi”, *Mississippi Eyewitness*, pg 8

⁴ Alice Lake, “Last Summer in Mississippi”, pg 237

⁵ Alice Lake, *ibid*, pg 233

⁶ Nick Kotz, *ibid*, pg 158.

⁷ Jonathan Steele, “The Summer of Hate”, *The Guardian*, 6/18/2004

⁸ Alice Lake, *ibid*, pg 237.

⁹ John Hersey, “A Life for a Vote”, pg 217.

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