



Time Code: 1:18 – 5:40

This story really ought to start in slavery. But then again, in, say, the 1950s, a few generations after the end of slavery, life for black Mississippians looked and felt much like it had during those centuries in bondage.

Like any black Mississippian who grew up in the Jim Crow years, MacArthur Cotton can tell you stories. The story of his grandfather, who, Cotton says, was fatally beaten by whites for teaching other blacks to read. Or the story of the black sharecropper in Winston County in the 1950s, who took the day off to go to a church gathering—without his white boss's permission. Cotton was there—about fifteen years old at the time, he says.

"He [the sharecropper] didn't go to plow that day, but his boss man wanted him to plow. So ... he came up to church with the rest of the people, and, [the boss came and said] 'I thought I told you to go to the field.' And [the sharecropper] got ready to walk away and [his boss] just kinda grabbed him and shot him six times. You know, right there, he fell and laid out there."

Eventually, Cotton says, somebody picked up the man's body and carried it away. "And nobody really said nothing, nobody really did anything. Things like that just happened. It happened all the time."

The system of segregation known as Jim Crow, which had been entrenched throughout the South since the end of Reconstruction in the late 1800s, demanded conformity from everybody, black and white. Bob Zellner is white; he grew up in southern Alabama in the 1940s and '50s. His upbringing was atypical, he says, in that "my father, unlike his brothers and his father, and his father, had broken with the Klan. So as I grew up I didn't get, in my family itself, the kind of racist teaching that was more or less automatic for white Southerners."

He did get it outside the family, however. As a teenager, Zellner worked at a country store in East Brewton, Alabama. He remembers being corrected by his boss.

"He explained that I had just said, 'Yes, sir' to a black man, and 'Yes, ma'am' to a black woman. And he explained to me that if it was just he and I and a black customer, it was all right, but if there were white people around that I couldn't do that. And I explained to him that I had been raised to have manners, and that meant that to older people you said 'yes, sir' and 'no, sir' and 'yes, ma'am' and 'no, ma'am.' And he said, 'Well that's all right if it's just us, but other people will get very upset if you do that.'"



In 1961, as a Huntington College senior in Montgomery, Alabama, Zellner and several other students were assigned to write a paper on the race problem for a sociology class. As part of their research, they arranged interviews—against their professor's directions—with civil rights leaders Martin Luther King, Jr., and Ralph Abernathy.

"And as a result of those meetings," Zellner says, "five of us were asked to leave school, the Klan burnt crosses around our dormitory. We were called into the office of the Attorney General of the state of Alabama, who said, 'You're under the communist influence.' ... And to boil it down, they gave you the choice of completely capitulating to their know-nothing racism or becoming a rebel."

After he'd finished school (he refused to leave and the school backed down), Zellner became the first white field secretary for SNCC. That group had been formed as a young people's wing of Martin Luther King's group, the Southern Christian Leadership Conference. SNCC would be the first to mount a public campaign against Jim Crow in Mississippi—but not until 1961. Before then, even while blacks were launching bus boycotts and lunch-counter sit-ins in other Southern states, the Mississippi movement stayed underground.

"You know, in spite of growing up in Alabama, where it's not too much different—but Mississippi! It was just—this was the last place," says John Lewis, who now represents Georgia in the U.S. Congress. In 1961, Lewis was 21 and a hero of the Freedom Rides. The Freedom Riders rode buses into the South to challenge whites-only lunch counters and restrooms. Lewis was punched and kicked by South Carolina segregationists. Rioting whites beat him bloody in Montgomery, Alabama. But what scared him was Mississippi.

"When you crossed that state line over into Mississippi, it's just this sense of something like the climate changed, the air got warmer and your heart started beating faster. ... Too many bodies had been found, black bodies, had been found in the Pearl River or the Tallahatchee River in the state of Mississippi," says Lewis



Time Code: 5:40 – 8:08

In the early 1960s, most black Mississippians were locked in poverty on cotton plantations. Public education was separate—and so unequal that most blacks were illiterate. Democracy Mississippi-style was a travesty. Back in 1890, whites had designed a system allowing county registrars to decide who could vote, based on what was called a literacy test. In practice, the county officials only rejected blacks.

In the three years before the Freedom Summer volunteers made headlines, SNCC staff members and black Mississippians quietly risked their lives testing Jim Crow.

Black Mississippians like Unita Blackwell. "I guess I was born in it, I was born in the movement; the day I was born I was born black," says Blackwell, a large woman with a deep, sonorous voice who lives in the Mississippi River town of Mayersville. "So all my life I knew something was wrong with the way that people perceived me as a black person, 'cause I was born in the Mississippi Delta."

In the 1970s, Unita Blackwell would become mayor of Mayersville. In 1992 she would win the prestigious MacArthur "genius" grant. But such achievements were unthinkable in the early 1960s. Then, Blackwell and her husband lived in a two-room shotgun house and worked on a plantation. She'd heard about the Freedom Rides, and she'd heard that young civil rights workers—some of them educated blacks from the North—had ventured into Mississippi.

"One day we were sitting on the porch," she recalls, "and here come two more guys and they was walkin' fast, and we know that at that time you did not walk fast in the South. And so they just said, 'Hello!' And didn't nobody speak that way, you know. We'd say 'How y'all feelin?' you know. And we said, 'That's them.'"

A few days later, a SNCC staff member came to Blackwell's church to speak. He was looking for people brave enough to walk into their county courthouse and attempt to register for the vote. "And I stood up," Blackwell says. "My husband caught me by the dress tail and pulled me back down, because he was supposed to stand up first, you see, because he's the man. So he stood, then I stood up, and I've been standing up ever since."

When Blackwell and several others went to see the Issaquena County registrar, a mob of angry whites met them at the courthouse. She was rejected as a voter without being physically attacked.

But other blacks who tried to register were beaten, jailed, even murdered.



Time Code: 8:08 – 11:08

The summer of 1964 would become famous for three murders, but three earlier killings led the Mississippi civil rights movement to launch Freedom Summer.

Herbert Lee, a black dairy farmer and NAACP member near the south Mississippi town of Liberty, was one of the first to join SNCC's voter registration efforts. Lee lived across the road from his state representative, E.H. Hurst. "In 1961, you know you're talking about a white state legislator," says Michael Sayer, a white New Yorker who was on the SNCC staff in the early 1960's.

Hurst and Lee "had grown up across the road from each other ... and they were friends," Sayer stresses. "They broke bread together ... their children played together."

The friendship illustrates that segregation was not an expression of racial hatred, Sayer argues. It was a strictly enforced division of power.

"When Herbert Lee got involved in the voter registration in 1961, he stepped across this cultural divide. And E.H. Hurst invited Herbert Lee to see him down at the cotton gin, and he assassinated Herbert Lee," Sayer says.

Hurst claimed he'd shot Lee in self-defense. An all-white jury acquitted him—a typical verdict when white Southerners killed black ones.

"Really, it's the brutalizing of a people, and these deaths are sort of the ultimate forms of that," says Bob Moses, who was the cerebral and morally forceful leader of SNCC's Mississippi campaign in the early 1960s. He was in his mid-20s; that made him an elder in the movement. After growing up in Harlem, Moses had completed his master's degree in philosophy at Harvard, and taught high school mathematics for a couple of years before joining SNCC. Besides numerous beatings and jailings for his civil rights efforts, Moses survived a drive-by murder attempt in early 1963.

A few months later, in June of 1963, avowed white supremacist Byron de la Beckwith fired a single bullet through the back of Medgar Evers, Mississippi leader of the NAACP.

"When Medgar was assassinated it focused a lot of national attention on Mississippi and various individuals and groups were considering doing something," Moses says.



Later that fall, the assassination of President Kennedy shook the nation to its core. The Mississippi movement was traumatized, but also hopeful that the national turmoil might create an opening, a chance to "turn a corner," as Moses puts it.

Time Code: 11:08 – 14:30

In the fall of 1963, Moses proposed a massive project for the following summer—a campaign aimed at breaking the back of Mississippi's closed political system. Civil rights groups would join forces with Northern charitable foundations, student activists, and religious groups. Moses had already teamed up with activist Allard Lowenstein, who had recruited a number of mostly white students from Stanford and Yale to help with Mississippi voter registration efforts in 1963. The centerpiece of the plan for 1964: to invite up to a thousand such Northern volunteers. They would help register black Mississippians for the vote—and sign them up in a new party, the Mississippi Freedom Democrats.

But the plan prompted sharp debate within SNCC. The group prided itself on practicing integration. It had a few white staff members from its beginnings. But some on the mostly black SNCC staff in Mississippi opposed a large infusion of white Northerners. They wanted black Mississippians to build their own movement and win their own freedom. Others argued bringing in whites was the only way to force the nation to confront the reality of Mississippi.

"It was damned if you do and damned if you don't, that's all," says Moses. "But that was Mississippi."

The argument raged within SNCC until January of 1964, when word came of yet another killing.

"Lot of people do night hunting and stuff up there, so it's not unusual to hear gunshots in January at night," says Henry Allen, now a construction contractor a Baton Rouge, Louisiana. "And my grandfather, he say he heard 'em too, said it sounded like about three of 'em."

Henry Allen was 18 years old when his father, Louis, was shot dead at their front gate outside of Liberty, Mississippi. Louis Allen was a logger and farmer. He had been an eyewitness two years earlier when the white state legislator, E.H. Hurst, killed Herbert Lee for trying to register black voters. Allen told friends that Hurst's claim of shooting Lee in self-defense was a lie; the killing was cold-blooded. But under threats and harassment from local police and other whites, Allen had declined



to testify against Hurst. Still the threats continued. Despite pleas from the civil rights movement, the FBI refused to protect Allen. On that January night, his son Henry came home from a date and found him in the front yard.

"Oh, he was just mutilated," Henry Allen says. "You shoot a person in the head with a shotgun at close range, I mean—just chaos, man. I never wanted my mama or my little sister to ever see him. My mama wanted to go down to that road, but she'd have stroked, she'd have probably died right there. It's just too much to look at, somebody that close to you. 'Cause we was close people."

No one was ever charged with the murder. At the news of Allen's death, Bob Moses ended the debate about the proposed Mississippi summer project. "It was my decision to move it," he says decades later. "And what moved me was Louis's murder. That was it."

A civil rights coalition, led by SNCC and the Congress of Racial Equality, or CORE, announced plans for what would come to be known as Freedom Summer—a peaceful campaign to bring democracy to Mississippi. Besides college students and teachers, several hundred lawyers, medical professionals and clergy would descend on the state. Mississippi politicians and newspaper editors bristled at the planned "invasion" by "outside agitators." The Ku Klux Klan and another racist group, the White Citizens Council, issued threats.