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## Mississippi Notebook: Whatever Became Of Willie Higgs?

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3/18/64

# MISSISSIPPI NOTEBOOK

By TOM ETHRIDGE



## Whatever Became Of Willie Higgs?

FOR THOSE WHO remember him and may wonder what he is doing these days, former Jackson attorney William Higgs is one of Washington's most militant lobbyists for integration, a lawyer for the Student Non-Violent Coordinating Council (SNCC), the author of several titles of the pending "civil rights" bill, and a close friend of the NAACP's Roy Wilkins.

So says his alma mater's student newspaper, the Harvard Crimson, in a feature article entitled "Bill Higgs," written by one Curtis Hessler. It notes that "Eight years ago Mississippi Bill Higgs graduated from Harvard Law School with modest grades."

The Harvard writeup neglects to mention the Jackson court conviction of Attorney Higgs on charges of contributing to the delinquency of a minor (boy). Some aspects of his controversial career are aired in the article. Quote:

"BILL HIGGS was in Cambridge last week, interviewing students for his project in Washington this summer. Inevitably the interview degenerates into a tug of war with Higgs carefully outlining his work and the student anxiously trying to probe the bizarre details of this man's history. The student usually lost, for Higgs is reticent about his past, and his 'conversion' has left no visible scars. Still the complete Southern gentleman, he drawls softly and easily, smiles often, listens courteously—with apparent interest—to any argument, and seems incapable of anger or depression. His 6 feet, 3 inch frame moves with an awkward rural grace, out of place, and charming, in both the halls of Congress and the dining room of Leverett House. The aloof informality suggests anything but a stormy past.

"HIGGS GAVE little thought to the race issue before 1959. That year, in fact, he ran for the legislature as a 'staunch

segregationist.' However, " at that time he also began accepting Negro clients 'out of curiosity; "They came to me beaten, their eyes knocked out, their land stolen. I found that there was no remedy in the courts or in politics. I began to investigate my beliefs.'

"The step from investigation to action was a quick one. Early in 1961 Higgs was approached by a young Negro wearing a purple shirt, leather jacket, sunglasses and a determined frown. 'You've spoken well of us, Mr. Higgs, but we've all heard enough talk. I plan to enter Ole Miss this year. Help me.' The lawyer agreed, and eighteen months later James Meredith walked on the Oxford campus.

"HIGGS SOON received prestigious civil liberties awards in New York and Los Angeles — and death threats from the sheriff's office in Clarksdale, Mississippi. His parents began to receive endless insults from town folk and economic intimidation from local grocers. Finally last year, the Jackson District Attorney told him to expect 'unlimited jailings' upon returning to the state.

"Understandably, Higgs has not returned and won't 'until the state undergoes a major political revolution — Negroes in all levels and offices, submitting rights bills of their own in Congress.'

"When asked how long this will be, Higgs frowns pensively, rubs his chin and drawls slowly, 'two years, maybe less. It will probably take total federal occupation' . . .

"Higgs enthusiasm often races beyond enactment to enforcement of the civil rights bill, which will be the focus of his program this summer. 'We must force the President to prove his liberalism, to fish or cut bait.' Higgs fears Johnson will make an election-year deal on the enforcement issue, and the prospect infuriates him." (From the Harvard Crimson, 3-4-64)