University of Mississippi

eGrove

Clippings

James W. Silver Collection

3-18-1964

Mississippi Notebook: Whatever Became Of Willie Higgs?

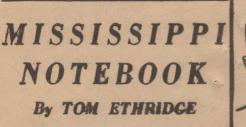
Tom Ethridge

Follow this and additional works at: https://egrove.olemiss.edu/jws_clip

Recommended Citation

Ethridge, Tom, "Mississippi Notebook: Whatever Became Of Willie Higgs?" (1964). *Clippings*. 261. https://egrove.olemiss.edu/jws_clip/261

This Article is brought to you for free and open access by the James W. Silver Collection at eGrove. It has been accepted for inclusion in Clippings by an authorized administrator of eGrove. For more information, please contact egrove@olemiss.edu.



3/18/64



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

So says his alma mater's student newspaper, the Harvard Crimson, in a f e a t u r e article entitled "Bill Higgs," written by one Curtis Hessler. It notes that "Eight y e a r s ago Mississippi B ill 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 anxious-ly trying to probe the biazarre details of this man's history. The student usually lost, for Higgs is reticent about h is 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 depres-sion. 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 dinning 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 curiasity; "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 talks-I plan to enter Olle. 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. H is parents began to receive endless insults from town folk and economic intimidation from local grocers. F in all y 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.'

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

"Higgs enthusiasm of teen 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 H a r v a r d Crimson, 3-4-64)