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“BLACK AND WHITE TOGETHER, WE SHALL WIN”: SOUTHERN WHITE
ACTIVISTS IN THE MISSISSIPPI CIVIL RIGHTS MOVEMENT

by

Olivia Bethany Moore

A Thesis
Submitted to the Graduate School
and the Department of History
at The University of Southern Mississippi
in Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements
for the Degree of Master of Arts

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ABSTRACT

“BLACK AND WHITE TOGETHER, WE SHALL WIN”: SOUTHERN WHITE ACTIVISTS IN THE MISSISSIPPI CIVIL RIGHTS MOVEMENT

by Olivia Bethany Moore

August 2016

During the Civil Rights Movement, Mississippi has often been characterized as a simple battle of white racists against black activists. Drawing heavily on oral histories, personal publications, and Mississippi Sovereignty Commission reports, this thesis examines the unconventional stories of white southerners who transcended the segregationist environments in which they were born. As southern white activism took many forms, this work offers biographical insights to three individuals who have received little scholarly attention: journalist P.D East, National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP) activist Buford Posey, and William Carey president Ralph Noonkester. While their contributions between 1950-1971 differed, being white and active in the Deep South connects all three lives. A closer examination of what spurred their involvement sheds light on how activism should be defined, how it developed, and how it was received in Mississippi.

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DEDICATION

I am extremely grateful for my friend, Hayden McDaniel. Thank you for listening to me talk through ideas, reading parts of my thesis, and accompanying me on a research trip to Neshoba County. Thank you also to my family and Alexander Herty for supporting and encouraging me throughout my degree. This would not have been possible without you.

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CHAPTER I - INTRODUCTION

“Posey, we’ve eliminated three of your friends tonight, and you’re next.” In the early hours of June 22, 1964, Neshoba County, Mississippi, resident Buford W. Posey hung up the telephone on a man he assumed was the infamous Ku Klux Klan Kleagle Edgar Ray Killen. Later that week, the Federal Bureau of Investigation launched an exhaustive manhunt for three men who Posey knew were already dead.¹

Freedom Summer had barely completed its first week organizing African American voters in Mississippi when the White Knights of the Ku Klux Klan, a notoriously violent faction based out of Laurel, Mississippi, kidnapped and murdered James Chaney, Andrew Goodman, and Michael Schwerner. After entering the hostile environment, the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee (SNCC) volunteers disappeared during a visit to the recently torched Mt. Zion United Methodist Church in Philadelphia, Mississippi. In the weeks before Goodman and Schwerner departed, Posey warned the native New Yorkers of the risks that would accompany their journey to the Magnolia State. When visiting Schwerner in Meridian, Posey added, “Mickey, don’t go to Neshoba County. They’ll kill you.”² The two men expected a certain level of violence, but neither imagined that their lives were seriously at risk. Despite weeks of preparation and intense training at Ohio’s Western College for Women, nothing could prepare the northern volunteers for the hate that engulfed the state of Mississippi.

¹ Buford Posey. Interview by Wesley French. 12 October 2007. Transcript. Center for Oral History and Cultural Heritage (COHCH). McCain Library and Archives, University of Southern Mississippi, Hattiesburg. Mississippi Digital Library, USM Libraries. Web. 12. January. 2016.

² Joe Atkin, “The Ghosts of Buford Posey: A Civil Rights Legend,” *Hattiesburg American*, September 4, 1995, 5.

Posey, on the other hand, had lived through the terror. As the first and only white member of the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People's (NAACP) Neshoba County branch, he witnessed the forceful backlash against the Civil Rights Movement firsthand. With the resurgence of militant white supremacy in the early 1950s, the threat of violence followed anyone who challenged the deep-rooted system. Unlike Goodman and Schwerner, Posey as a white southerner was familiar with the risks attached to activism. In an environment in which whiteness and racism were inseparable, his contribution to the fight for racial equality was an aberration and one worthy of greater attention.

On that fateful June morning in 1964, Posey received little attention. His extensive knowledge of the dangerous networks in Neshoba County was unusual, but the FBI did not treat his report of a threatening phone call from the Ku Klux Klan (KKK) with urgency. Only in the weeks following the disappearance of the three Freedom Summer workers did anyone acknowledge Posey's previously ignored voice. On July 1, 1964, he agreed to a live national interview on NBC News.³ Fully aware of the risks it involved, Posey used this forum to speak out publicly against the Philadelphia residents responsible for killing Chaney, Goodman and Schwerner. In doing so, Posey was one of the first people to implicate the city's sheriff and suspected KKK member, Lawrence A. Rainey.

Unsurprisingly, Posey was increasingly ostracized in the weeks following the broadcast. Many in his local community viewed his willingness to challenge segregation as a serious betrayal. The NBC interview so angered one local woman that she slammed

³ "\$1 Million Suit Filed Against NBC, others," *Neshoba-Democrat*, July 23, 1964. Accessed November 12, 2015. <http://archive.is/RDNHw>.

her hands on her television set proclaiming, “Buford Posey does not represent the thinking people of Neshoba County.”⁴ Forced to leave the Masonic Lodge where he was staying at the time, he fled to Tennessee.

Posey left Philadelphia’s hostile environment on June 30, 1964. Initially intending to travel through Jackson, he changed his route in response to rumors of a KKK plot to kill him in the capital. Before heading to his final destination, Posey stopped for gas at a service station in Tuscaloosa, Alabama. In the overwhelmingly violent atmosphere, being recognized for his involvement in the Civil Rights Movement could have led to his death. Posey could not believe his eyes when he spotted an associate of the Klan working at the store. Much to his surprise, the Klansman recognized Posey from the recent NBC interview but assumed that as a fellow white southerner he was working as an informant for the FBI. Posey later joked, “That’s the only thing I ever got from the Klan: a free tank of gas in Tuscaloosa, Alabama.”⁵ In an ironic turn of events, a member of the organization searching to kill Posey thanked him for his work, and filled his tank with the gas that ultimately permitted his escape.

Stories of the Neshoba County murders have been exhaustively recounted in both academic literature and popular culture.⁶ Posey’s place within these narratives, however,

⁴ Florence Mars, *Witness in Philadelphia* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1977), 95.

⁵ Atkin, “The Ghosts of Buford Posey,” 5.

⁶ For academic works on the Neshoba County murders see: Bruce Watson, *Freedom Summer: The Savage Season of 1964 That Made Mississippi Burn and Made America a Democracy* (New York: Penguin, 2011); Carol V. R. George, *One Mississippi, Two Mississippi: Methodists Murder and the Struggle for Racial Justice in Neshoba County* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2015); Don Mitchell, *The Freedom Summer Murders* (New York: Scholastic Press, 2014); Doug McAdam, *Freedom Summer* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1988); Seth Cagin and Phillip Dray, *We Are Not Afraid: The Story of Goodman, Schwerner, and Chaney and the Civil Rights Campaign for Mississippi* (New York: Macmillan, 1988); For a discussion on the effect of the *Mississippi Burning* film in an understanding of the Civil Rights Movement see: Jennifer Fuller, “Debating the Present Through the Past: Representations of the Civil Rights Movement in the 1990s,” in *The Civil Rights Movement in American Memory*, ed. Renee C. Romano and

has remained relatively unexplored. Portraying him as simply a “town eccentric,” historians have overlooked his potential as someone capable of complicating dimensions of the larger civil rights narrative.⁷ Born and raised in the same community as those who murdered Chaney, Goodman, and Schwerner, Posey brings into question the nature of white southern activism and factors that sparked it. Unlike other Neshoba County residents, he was not a member of the White Citizens’ Council (WCC) or the KKK, and he refused to remain silent about persistent inequality in Mississippi. Posey’s life demonstrates that whiteness and racism were not inextricably linked in the Deep South.⁸ Moreover, his experience helps identify previously obscured actors who were critical to the fight for racial equality in Mississippi.

In early simplistic accounts of the Civil Rights Movement, “white villains rained down terror on nonviolent demonstrators dressed in their Sunday best.”⁹ Often produced by journalists and activists, this narrative celebrated the charismatic personalities, as displayed by figures like Martin Luther King, and defined the Movement entirely by non-

Leigh Raiford (Athens: The University of Georgia Press, 2007); Emilye Crosby, *Civil Rights History from the Ground Up: Local Struggles, a National Movement* (Athens: University of Georgia Press, 2011).

⁷ Mars, *Witness in Philadelphia*, 95. Similar characterizations of Posey include: Bob Zellner and Julian Bond, *The Wrong Side of Murder Creek* (New York: New South Books, 2011); Willie Morris, *The Courting of Marcus Dupree* (Jackson: University Press of Mississippi, 1992).

⁸ Whiteness is a social construction and its meaning has shifted over time. However, scholarship on white male identity is united by a similar theme: all present the struggle for power in gendered as well as racialized terms. For works on Southern whiteness in the twentieth century, see: Grace Elizabeth Hale, *Making Whiteness: The Culture of Segregation in the South 1890, 1940* (New York: Pantheon Books, 1998); James C. Cobb, *Away Down South: A History of Southern Identity* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2007); Kristina DuRocher, *Raising Racists: The Socialization of White Children in the Jim Crow South* (Lexington: University Press of Kentucky, 2011); Lydia Plath and Sergio Lussanna, *Black and White Masculinity in the Recent South 1800-2000* (Newcastle Upon Tyne: Cambridge Scholars Publishing, 2009); Steve Estes, “A Question of Honor: Masculinity and Massive Resistance” in *White Masculinity in the Recent South*, ed. Trent Watts (Baton Rouge: University of Louisiana Press, 2008); Ted Ownby, *Subduing Satan: Religion, Recreation, and Manhood in the Rural South 1865-1920* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1998); Trent Watts, *One Homogenous People: Narratives of White Southern Identity 1890-1920* (Knoxville: University of Tennessee Press, 2010).

⁹ Jacqueline Dowd Hall, “The Long Civil Rights Movement and the Political Uses of the Past,” *Journal of American History* 91.4 (2005): 1236.

violent protest at the national level.¹⁰ A number of early works marked the Movement's origins with the 1954 *Brown v. Board of Education* decision to end segregated public schools. As a result, many scholars focused on the effort toward desegregation, ignoring other critical aims. In this narrative, the Civil Rights Act of 1964 and the Voting Rights Act of 1965 constituted the final big victories, and the Movement declined rapidly after King's death in 1968.

John Dittmer's *Local People: The Struggle for Civil Rights in Mississippi*

changed the field dramatically in 1995. In shifting attention to activism at the grassroots, Dittmer's work extended the Mississippi Movement's time period beyond the 1954-1968 model. As he included the unknown experiences of Fannie Lou Hamer, Annie Devine, and Hollis Watkins, Dittmer also altered the gender and class dynamic.¹¹ Despite this important intervention, Charles W. Eagles offered a persuasive reexamination in 2000. Eagles criticized Dittmer and other early historians whose lack of detachment led to an "asymmetrical approach" that focused solely on one side of the story.¹² To provide a more comprehensive account, Eagles encouraged historians to include a discussion of the resistance by white segregationists.¹³ In doing so, historians have an opportunity to place

¹⁰ David J. Garrow, *Bearing the Cross: Martin Luther King, Jr., and the Southern Christian Leadership Conference, 1955-1968* (New York: Morrow, 1986); Taylor Branch, *Parting the Waters: America in the King Years 1954- 63* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1988); Taylor Branch, *Pillar of Fire: America in the King Years 1954- 63* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1988); Taylor Branch, *At Canaan's Edge: America in the King Years 1954- 63* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1988); Taylor Branch, *The King Years: Historic Moments in the Civil Rights Movement* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 2012).

¹¹ John Dittmer, *Local People: The Struggle for Civil Rights in Mississippi* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1994). See also: Charles Payne, *I've Got the Light of Freedom: The Organizing Tradition and the Mississippi Freedom Struggle* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1995). For the North Carolina experience, see: William H. Chafe, *Civilities and Civil Rights: Greensboro, North Carolina, and the Black Struggle for Freedom* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1980).

¹² Charles W. Eagles, "Towards New Histories of the Civil Rights Era," *The Journal of Southern History* 66. 4 (2000): 816.

¹³ Critical works on the white opposition include: Clive Webb, *Massive Resistance: Southern Opposition to the Second Reconstruction* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2005); Dan T. Carter, *The*

the Movement in the context of southern white society in its entirety. Expanding on Eagles's work, this thesis draws attention to the southern whites overshadowed by narratives pitting black activists against white segregationists. Like the opposition, white activists need greater scholarly attention.

Following Dittmer's work, historians explored movements and individuals in specific Mississippi locations. Emilye Crosby's and Todd Moyer's works on Claiborne and Sunflower Counties are two community studies that led the field in this direction.¹⁴ Expanding on Eagles's critique, Moyer, in particular, focused more closely on the white opposition in the Mississippi Delta. In addition, community studies have provided fruitful results for understanding the role of women in the Movement. In *Crossroads at Clarksdale*, Francoise N. Hamlin draws attention to the importance of Vera Pigeo, a civil rights leader and beautician in Clarksdale, Mississippi. Hamlin demonstrates clearly the "malleability of activism" as she traces the importance of Pigeo's mothering role as an organizing and mobilizing tool.¹⁵ Nonetheless, southern white activists have been neglected in the push to identify the Movement's hidden figures. Acknowledging men like Posey adds weight to Hamlin's account, emphasizing that activism took many different forms.

Politics of Rage: George Wallace, The Origins of the New Conservatism, and the Transformation of American Politics (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1995); Francis M. Wilhoit, *The Politics of Massive Resistance* (New York: Braziller, 1973); Neil R. McMillen, *The Citizens' Council: Organized Resistance to the Second Reconstruction, 1944-1964* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1994); Numan V. Bartley, *The Rise of Massive Resistance: Race and Politics in the South During the 1950s* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1969); Numan V. Bartley, *The New South, 1945-1980* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1995); Pete Daniel, *Lost Revolutions: The American South in the 1950s* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2000); Yasuhiro Katagiri, *The Mississippi State Sovereignty Commission: Civil Rights and States' Rights* (Jackson: University of Press of Mississippi, 2001).

¹⁴ Emilye Crosby, *A Little Taste of Freedom: The Black Freedom Struggle in Claiborne County, Mississippi* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2006).

¹⁵ Francoise Nicole Hamlin, *Crossroads at Clarksdale: The Black Freedom Struggle in the Mississippi Delta after World War Two* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2012).

Through focusing on communities, scholars increasingly understood the Civil Rights Movement as “more grassroots, less philosophically nonviolent, and less pulpit-directed.”¹⁶ Investigating individual locations also lengthened the traditional narrative that originally accepted *Brown* as the major catalyst. Since Jacqueline Dowd Hall’s call for “the long Civil Rights Movement” in 2001, historians have pushed their understanding of the Movement’s origins back further.¹⁷ Hall argues that the Movement emerged in the 1930s and was linked closely to the New Deal’s rise and fall. For her, the fight for racial equality intensified most in the early 1940s during the Second World War. Rather than focusing simply on legislative and judicial victories, Glenda Gilmore offers another important contribution in looking at the links among the push for civil rights, labor movements, communism, and various student organizations. In considering larger national and global developments, Gilmore concludes that Movement activists “were part of a much larger push for economic justice and broad vision of human rights.”¹⁸ Posey’s affiliation with the Socialist Movement emphasizes the value in considering the intersection of different ideologies.

According to Moye, these historiographical trends modified an understanding of the Movement’s nature and its chronology. Additionally, they have altered its geography,

¹⁶ J. Todd Moye, *Let The People Decide: Black Freedom and White Resistance Movements in Sunflower County, Mississippi, 1945-1986* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2004), 165.

¹⁷ Hall, “The Long Civil Rights Movement and the Political Uses of the Past.” Through investigating a community in the Mississippi Delta, Todd J. Moye observed that the White Citizens’ Council did not necessarily respond directly to the *Brown* decision. Instead, it emerged because Sunflower County activists had been organizing and pushing for change for a number of years before then. See: Moye, *Let The People Decide*.

¹⁸ Glenda Gilmore, *Defying Dixie: The Radical Roots of Civil Rights, 1919-1950* (New York: W.W. Norton & Company, 2008), 2.

pointing toward a “wide civil rights movement.”¹⁹ In *Groundwork: Local Black Freedom Movements in America*, political scientists Jeanne Theoharis and Komozi Woodard incorporate this method as they consider “historical figures, communities, and issues outside of the normal civil rights narrative.”²⁰ Although popular forms of non-violent protest were prevalent, historians have introduced complex figures whose actions are outside of this particular narrative. Timothy Tyson’s *Radio Free Dixie* takes this approach by asserting the importance of one of the most influential black activists, Robert F. Williams.²¹ In drawing attention to Williams’s voice, Tyson highlights links between the Black Power Movement and the armed self-defense that was once overlooked in traditional accounts of the freedom struggle. Acknowledging all levels of activism enriches an understanding of the larger Civil Rights Movement.

Broadening the narrative, an exploration of southern white activism expands existing historiography as it pushes the boundaries of civil rights participation. Through an investigation of three white southerners, it is possible to shed light on how activism should be defined, how it developed, and how it was received in Mississippi. Although Buford Posey’s story in itself is compelling, linking him to like-minded opponents of segregation in the Deep South leads to new conclusions about why those who were not victims of racial discrimination became activists. This work examines Posey’s unconventional story alongside those of two other white southerners, P.D. East and Ralph Noonkester, who rejected their inherited segregationist environments. Comparing

¹⁹ J. Todd Moye, “Focusing Our Eyes on the Prize: How Community Studies are Reframing and Rewriting the History of the Civil Rights Movement,” in *Civil Rights History from the Ground Up: Local Struggles, a National Movement*, ed. Emilye Crosby (Athens: University of Georgia Press, 2011), 163.

²⁰ Jeanne Theoharis and Komozi Woodard, *Groundwork: Local Black Freedom Movements in America* (New York: New York University Press, 2005), x.

²¹ Timothy B. Tyson, *Radio Free Dixie: Robert F. Williams and the Roots of Black Power* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2001).

different types of activism within local contexts, this draws together Posey's biography with a radical civil rights journalist and the president of William Carey College in Hattiesburg, Mississippi who aided the desegregation of the institution in 1965. While their contributions to the Civil Rights Movement differed, being white and active in the Piney Woods region of Mississippi, along with their steadfast commitment to racial justice, connects all three lives.

After investigating East's, Posey's and Noonkester's experiences comparatively, this thesis defines civil rights activism as the participation in any action with an intention to overthrow Mississippi's white power structure.²² Despite their white southern privilege, these men challenged the entrenched system of racial inequality that existed throughout the South. As they participated in this style of activism, each overcame fear and pressure from his local community. East provided a public critique of the WCC; Posey drew attention to the Ku Klux Klan's corruption; Noonkester helped overturn the established system of segregation in Hattiesburg schools. In opposing an order that denied racial equality, these men deserve a place in the history of civil rights activism.

Tracing these individuals' lives also emphasizes that a fixed model of southern white activism does not exist. Often, the experiences of Tougaloo College Chaplain

²² It is necessary to define a series of political terms that are in constant flux. Avoiding the characterization "liberal," this study instead uses the words "activist" and "radical" interchangeably. These terms describe white Southerners who actively participated in actions that undermined white supremacy. Along with morally believing in racial equality, these individuals were willing to risk their privilege as whites to better the lives of African Americans. Drawing on David Chappell's definition, the term "moderate" denotes, "a larger group who, without any moral commitment, found themselves compelled to break with the segregationists in order to restore social peace, a good business climate, or the good name of their city in the national headlines." See: David L. Chappell, *Inside Agitators: White Southerners in the Civil Rights Movement* (Baltimore: John Hopkins University Press, 1996), xxii. This moderate group believed in segregation, but opposed racial violence. Finally, the term "conservative" represents the general population who wholeheartedly believed in the system of segregation. This group was not willing to change this way of life; some extremists even used violence to enforce it.

Edwin King, and Bob Zellner, the son of a Methodist minister, dominate a larger understanding.²³ Rightly, scholarship has emphasized white activism's roots in religion and spirituality. To gain a more complete picture, however, it is equally important to note other intellectual communities that sparked and encouraged the desire for change.²⁴ This study demonstrates that southern institutions beyond the church provided forums in which locals could develop more radical ideas about race. East was part of Mississippi's thriving journalist community. Posey was closely linked to the Socialist Party.

Noonkester was part of the Chamber of Commerce, a prominent business organization in the Hattiesburg community. Through the diverse connections that were formed within these institutions, the men developed specific networks with people who facilitated their fight for equality.

By approaching the past through a presentist lens, it is possible to downplay the radical actions of a small number of southern whites. Violent repercussions awaited anyone who challenged the South's order. All three men, nonetheless, took the risk. Despite being exposed to racism at an early age, they demonstrated through their activism that alternative ideas were at work in the Deep South. David Chappell's *Inside Agitators: White Southerners in the Civil Rights Movement* represents one of the earliest studies to examine white involvement collectively.²⁵ However, Chappell places "middle roaders who favored segregation" at the center of his analysis, neglecting other whites who were

²³ Zellner and Bond, *The Wrong Side of Murder Creek*; Ed King and Trent Watts, *Ed King's Mississippi: Behind the Scenes of Freedom Summer*.

²⁴ Zellner and Bond, *The Wrong Side of Murder Creek*.

²⁵ Chappell, *Inside Agitators*.

more directly involved in activism.²⁶ In contrast, East, Posey and Noonkester all worked to dismantle this system of racial inequality entirely.

As each man represents a different aspect of Southern society, it is important to look at their voices comparatively. While Posey's socialist affiliation provided him with more politically radical contacts, East's and Noonkester's roots in more conservative institutions occasionally confined them. As East struggled to sell newspapers for profit because of the White Citizens' Council's boycott, Noonkester attempted to sell integration to a community in which most individuals were devout segregationists. Highlighting these differences draws attention to the diverse levels of activism that existed in the white community. Despite these disparities, all three should be viewed equally as "serious collaborators with activists of color."²⁷

The first chapter investigates Petal's rogue journalist, P.D East. It explores the development of East's activist mentality and how it shaped his life in Mississippi. At a young age, East rejected the strict system of racism that depended on racial segregation. Although his journey to become a civil rights advocate was complicated, he recognized the need to eliminate inequality throughout the South.²⁸ After the WCC organized a chapter in his town, East decided to use his own publication *The Petal Paper* as a weapon against white supremacy. This chapter traces East's printed battle with the Council by highlighting his cutting use of humor as one of the most effective methods of his activism. East was a victim of severe economic intimidation, so his experience sheds

²⁶ *Ibid*, xxiv.

²⁷ Mark R. Warren, *Fire in the Heart: How White Activists Embrace Racial Justice* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2010), xii.

²⁸ At first, East accepted segregation and did not campaign for its complete destruction. As time went on, East realized it was necessary to get rid of this system entirely. He became increasingly concerned about the violence directed toward African Americans in Mississippi.

light on the opposition's combative methods. Additionally, his story reveals interactions between like-minded activists across the United States. He developed a particularly close relationship with the Texas journalist John Howard Griffin. Griffin's own work *Black Like Me* discusses his interactions with East when investigating the plight of African-Americans in Mississippi.²⁹ Griffin viewed East as an inspiration, particularly his capacity as a symbol of hope amidst the Deep South's severely racist environment.

Gary Huey's *Rebel With a Cause: P.D. East, Southern Liberalism and the Civil Rights Movement* is the only extensive study of East's life. Huey examines East's non-conventional experience, using it as a tool to dissect part of the population that "did not fit the socioeconomic and educational mold of the typical southern liberal."³⁰ According to Huey, East could not rely on the same financial backing as other journalists because of his lower-class background. Ultimately, this made his controversial stand against segregation even more dangerous. Although East "never participated in any march, demonstration, or sit-in," he serves as both a powerful "symbol and a participant."³¹ Huey's work is extremely valuable, particularly as it paints a vivid picture of the political climate in which East lived.³² However, in considering him solely in relation to the

²⁹ John Howard Griffin, *Black like me* (Fort Worth: Sepia Publishing Company, 1960).

³⁰ Gary Huey, *Rebel With a Cause: P.D. East, Southern Liberalism and the Civil Rights Movement, 1953-1971* (Wilmington, DE: Scholarly Resources, 1985), 212.

³¹ *Ibid*, 212.

³² *Ibid*. Huey provides a detailed background of the political and social climate, drawing upon the affect of the Populist Revolt in the 1890s, the New Deal, the Second World War, the Cold War. There are a number of other important books that provide context for the political and social climate in the South at this time. Some notable works include: Chester M. Morgan, *Redneck Liberal: Theodore G. Bilbo and the New Deal* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1985); Grace Elizabeth Hale, *Making Whiteness: The Culture of Segregation in the South, 1890-1940* (New York: Pantheon Books, 1998); As Jason Sokol offers one of the most extensive studies of the Southern response to the Civil Rights Movement, he provides an extremely useful context for the effect that Jim Crow had on minds across the South. While his focus is the pro-segregationist viewpoint, he recognizes the diversity of experience throughout the region. See: Jason Sokol, *There Goes My Everything: White Southerners in the Age of Civil Rights, 1945-1975* (New York:

journalist community, he fails to identify other individuals who shared similar experiences.

The second chapter explores further the life of Buford Posey. It looks closely at his experiences growing up in Neshoba County's environment, the Second World War's effect on his activism, and his extensive network of support. Most involved with the activist community, Posey's connections ranged from Mississippi's NAACP Field Secretary Medgar Evers to the FBI's Nicholas Katzenbach. This chapter also considers the intersection between his beliefs as a Socialist and his unhesitating willingness to promote racial equality. Through his association with these intellectual communities, Posey found space to develop more radical views about race. This is evident in his written articles for the *American Socialist* magazine. In producing these writings, Posey articulated his thoughts on segregation, along with publically protesting dominant southern customs.

Like East, Posey effectively challenged segregation by using the media to raise awareness about persistent injustice within the state. This chapter documents several occasions when he attracted national attention. One notable incident was his run-in with the notoriously racist editor of the *Neshoba Democrat*, Jack Tannehill. Posey explains this in a 1959 article, "My Battle with the White Citizens' Council."³³ In this instance, Posey's challenge to the established system of segregation led to his "arrest on three different occasions, solitary confinement in jail," loss of his "Mississippi citizenship," and "a fine of \$329." Immediately, he fled "the state on a cold, rainy night of February,

Vintage, 2007); C. Vann Woodward, *The Strange Career of Jim Crow* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1955); W. J. Cash, *The Mind of the South* (New York: Vintage Books, 1941).

³³ Buford Posey, "My Battle with the White Citizens' Council," *American Socialist*, October 1959, 18.

1959, in order to avoid a 12 month sentence on a county convict gang.”³⁴ Similarly to East, Posey was a victim of intense economic intimidation, ultimately leading to his isolation from the Neshoba County community.

The final chapter assesses the contributions of Dr. Ralph Noonkester, particularly his legacy at William Carey College in Hattiesburg, Mississippi. Originally from Flatridge, Virginia, Noonkester’s position was fluid as both a southerner and as an outsider. This study considers his career in Mississippi and how Hattiesburg’s black and white communities responded to an outsider instigating change in their native environment. It looks closely at his involvement in Hattiesburg’s business community, particularly his role as president of the local Chamber of Commerce. Using his power in this organization, Noonkester was able to bring lasting change to William Carey College. After passing the Compliance Bill in 1965, the private college abolished segregation and opened its doors to African American students who had previously been excluded.

Alongside his contribution to Hattiesburg’s desegregation efforts, this work explores Noonkester’s place within the city’s African American communities. After the murder of local Hattiesburg activist Vernon Dahmer, Noonkester developed a close relationship with the family, particularly as he spearheaded a project to restore their firebombed home. Like East and Posey, Noonkester was often victimized by various white supremacist organizations. Along with receiving a series of forceful hate letters, the Ku Klux Klan burned a cross in front of his home. Nevertheless, Noonkester’s contributions to the education system situate him in a small group of white southerners who made lasting changes to life in Mississippi.

³⁴ *Ibid*, 18.

As “Jim Crow defined the minds and lives of Southerners,” there is no surprise that East, Posey, and Noonkester’s activism was met with deep criticism and aversion.³⁵ Mississippi’s own spy agency, the Mississippi State Sovereignty Commission, was particularly successful in monitoring the activities of civil rights activists. In this intense environment, announcing support for African American equality often resulted in harassment, economic intimidation, and in some extreme circumstances, even death. It has since been difficult to identify with the people who lived in the southern racial system without reducing them to “abstract monoliths, literally black and white.”³⁶ As a result, popular memory of white society in a state remembered as “a symbol of racial terror” is often dominated by the segregationist voices of Theodore Bilbo, Ross Barnett, and James Eastland.³⁷

When the Civil Rights Movement gained momentum in the early 1950s, citizens throughout the South responded with significant resistance as the southern way of life was slowly destroyed. Yet these three men exhibited a number of similarities that defined their activism. Born into poverty in rural Mississippi, from a young age both Posey and East developed a unique sense of justice for people of all races. In terms of activism, East and Posey were heavily active throughout the 1950s just as the age of violent resistance began. Both employed humorous prose to critique Mississippi’s white supremacist organizations. Similarly, they suffered financially at the hands of the WCC’s economic intimidation, were completely isolated by their communities, and were driven out of the state by the persisting threat of violence. Likewise, all three activists experienced a

³⁵ Sokol, *There Goes My Everything*, 3.

³⁶ Chappell, *Inside Agitators*, xii.

³⁷ Watson, *Freedom Summer*, 9.

similar sense of exclusion, and this is a prominent theme throughout. Acknowledging these similarities demonstrates the need for a study that considers southern white activism collectively in Mississippi.

Mississippi's white community held diverse opinions on race relations, an idea desperately in need of further investigation. While white activists are not entirely invisible in civil rights scholarship, their participation is often over-simplified.³⁸ East, Posey, and Noonkester demonstrate that southern white activism was more complex than first imagined. These men do not necessarily fit the heroic narrative of the movement: some were not immediate civil rights advocates, Posey and East supported armed self-defense, and Noonkester did not necessarily participate on the frontlines of activism that often defines popular conceptions of the Movement. In many instances, their activism was subtler. At the same time, the outcome of their participation was not always favorable. Two of the men were driven out of the state by the KKK, another had a cross burned on his lawn, and one's activism led directly to his downfall.

Focusing specifically on Mississippi between 1948 and 1971, it is possible to fill an existing gap by placing three unconventional white activists in conversation. Comparative biography provides historians with an opportunity to "enhance the connection between the study of individuals and the illumination of the larger patterns of

³⁸ One notable issue is that the prominence of autobiography has allowed the accounts of white activists to be presented in isolation. Some of the earliest accounts of white Southerners in the Movement are found in personal autobiographies, biographies or memoirs. See: Anne Braden, *The Wall Between* (Nashville: University of Tennessee Press, 1999); August Meier, *A White Scholar and the Black Community, 1945-1965* (Amherst: University of Massachusetts Press, 1992); Bob Zellner and Julian Bond, *The Wrong Side of Murder Creek*; Ed King and Trent Watts, *Ed King's Mississippi: Behind the Scenes of Freedom Summer*; Howard Zinn, *SNCC: The New Abolitionists (Radical 60s)* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1964); Mary King, *Freedom Song: A Personal Story of the 1960s Civil Rights Movement* (New York: William Morrow & Co, 1987); P.D. East, *The Magnolia Jungle: The Life, Times and Education of a Southern Editor* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1960); Sara Evans, *Personal Politics: The Roots of Women's Liberation in the Civil Rights Movement and the New Left* (New York: Vintage Books, 1979).

the past.”³⁹ In order to present a more comprehensive picture of what activism entails, future scholars must bring together diverse voices and contributions across the entire South. In viewing P.D. East, Buford Posey, and Ralph Noonkester collectively, it is also possible to draw new conclusions about why those who were not victims of racial discrimination risked their lives to campaign for African-American equality.

³⁹ The importance of comparative biography is discussed in the following article; Alan Brinkley, “Comparative Biography as Political History: Huey Long and Father Coughlin,” *The History Teacher*. 18.1 (1984): 9.

CHAPTER II – P.D. EAST: “A PROFESSIONAL NON-CONFORMIST.”

In his 1960 autobiography *The Magnolia Jungle: The Life, Times, and Education of a Southern Editor*, P.D. East recounted the event that led him to view African Americans as “human beings, nothing more and most definitely nothing less.”⁴⁰ His “dawning of consciousness” occurred sometime in the early autumn of 1925.⁴¹

At the breakfast table in their rural Mississippi home, East’s parents discussed a tragic event that took place the night before. In the evening, the flames from a wood stove fire tore through the home of a large African American family in the local neighborhood. While most of the family escaped, the ten-year-old daughter was trapped inside and perished in the flames. The following day, East’s mother decided to offer the family assistance, taking him with her on the journey to their home. East remembered vividly the smell of burning flesh that “lingered for over thirty years.”⁴² With the prevalence of lynchings throughout the state of Mississippi, the smell was recurrent in a place where “five black men were publicly burned at the stake” between 1923 and 1929.⁴³ In the Deep South, moreover, “white children’s exposure to black corpses was commonplace.”⁴⁴ For East, the charred body of the young child was a shocking image that remained with him for the rest of his life. He stated: “So long as I live, I’ll never forget the horror that come over me as I stood looking at that human form.”⁴⁵ The girl was just another child, just

⁴⁰ P.D. East, *The Magnolia Jungle: The Life, Times, and Education of a Southern Editor* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1960), 172.

⁴¹ *Ibid*, 16.

⁴² *Ibid*, 17.

⁴³ Michael Newton, *The Ku Klux Klan in Mississippi: A History* (Jefferson: McFarland and Company, 2010), 84.

⁴⁴ Jennifer Ritterhouse, *Growing up Jim Crow: How Black and White Southern Children Learned Race* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2006), 75.

⁴⁵ East, *The Magnolia Jungle*, 17.

another human being. Although his views on race developed gradually over time, this disturbing image spurred East's unique sense of justice for people of all races.

As an adult, P.D. East would become one of white supremacy's most outspoken critics. His challenge to Mississippi's repressive racial climate requires both further investigation and greater recognition. Looking closely at his journey towards activism adds layers of complexity to the larger civil rights narrative, particularly the ways white southerners were engaged in the fight for racial equality. East was not an immediate civil rights advocate, and it is often difficult to pin down his exact ideology. Nonetheless, he challenged racial discrimination in significant ways. His story as a white southerner is particularly important, as "he participated in the movement long before it was a popular cause, and when the level of danger was especially high."⁴⁶ Exploring his earlier experience enriches an understanding of civil rights activity during the 1950s, a decade that is sometimes neglected.

This chapter considers East's use of satirical journalism as one of his most effective methods of activism, as seen in his own publication *The Petal Paper*. To shed further light on his role in the civil rights struggle, it includes letters, newspapers, and several Sovereignty Commission files that were unavailable to the public until 1998.⁴⁷ Consequently, this work incorporates sources that were left out of previous analysis. Overall, the chapter considers East's model of activism, the extensive network of support

⁴⁶ Gary Huey, *Rebel With a Cause: P.D. East, Southern Liberalism and the Civil Rights Movement, 1953-1971* (Wilmington, DE: Scholarly Resources, 1985), x.

⁴⁷ After the Sovereignty Commission closed in 1977, state lawmakers sealed the organization's files until 2027. However, a lawsuit in 1989 resulted in some of the records being opened: there are some exceptions for people who are still living.

that sustained him, and the ways other white southerners responded to his challenge against white supremacy.

Drawing heavily on East's 1960 autobiography and Gary Huey's *Rebel With A Cause*, this chapter traces East's personal battle against the White Citizens' Council (WCC) in Mississippi.⁴⁸ Huey recognized the importance of East's voice when he published his biography in 1985. His work includes a wealth of information on East's life from his birth in 1921 to his death in 1971. While Huey views East alongside other professionals as part of a "southern liberal reform tradition," he also emphasizes the uniqueness of his background, social status, and economic standing.⁴⁹ In doing so, Huey fails to recognize the existence of similar figures outside of the journalist community. In placing East alongside Philadelphia's white activist and NAACP member, Buford Posey, it is clear that he was not necessarily alone in his experience. Both were born into poverty in Mississippi, both were targets of severe economic intimidation, and both were alienated by the rest of the white community for their participation in civil rights activism.

Since Huey's study and John T. Kneebone's *Southern Liberal Journalists and the Issue of Race, 1920-1944* published the same year, a large body of scholarship on the Civil Rights Movement and the southern has press emerged.⁵⁰ Rebecca Miller Davis

⁴⁸ East, *The Magnolia Jungle*; Gary Huey, *Rebel With a Cause*.

⁴⁹ Huey, *Rebel With a Cause*, 212.

⁵⁰ Historians often focus on a small group of individuals that would perhaps more adequately be described as moderates. See: Ann Waldron, *Hodding Carter: The Reconstruction of a Racist* (Chapel Hill: Algonquin Books, 1993); David R. Davies, *The Press and Race: Mississippi Journalists Confront the Movement* (Jackson: University Press of Mississippi, 2001); David R. Davies, "J Oliver Emmerich and the McComb *Enterprise-Journal*: Slow Change in McComb, 1964," *Journal of Mississippi History* 57.1 (1995); Gene Roberts and Hank Klibanoff, *The Race Beat: The Press, the Civil Rights Struggle, and the Awakening of a Nation* (New York: Knopf, 2006); Ira B. Harkey Jr., *The Smell of Burning Crosses: A White Integrationist Editor in Mississippi* (Jacksonville: Harris-Wolfe, 1967); Jan Whitt, *Burning Crosses*

recently suggested that in telling Mississippi's story, "many scholars have placed too much emphasis on Hodding Carter as the moderate voice in the state, and in the process, they have overlooked many of his fellow journalists."⁵¹ Differing from many of the middle class moderates, such as Carter and Hazel Brannon Smith, East "came from a rural, lower-class background and refused to join any group that might have given him aid."⁵² Furthermore, East was more of an extremist as his later activism campaigned for the complete destruction of segregation.

At the same time, his activities do not necessarily fit a heroic civil rights narrative in which southern dissent has "the optimistic tone of striving and overcoming."⁵³ David R. Davies critiques existing historical literature in arguing that journalists, like East, have been divided into two opposing groups: "the segregationists and the integrationists, the villains and the heroes."⁵⁴ East's story demonstrates the value in extending these previously fixed categories, in addition to looking at a longer timeline of activism. Nor does his experience fit the common narrative that "portrays whites as heroes and blacks as long-suffering victims."⁵⁵ Although East was a white southerner, his skin color offered no support or protection. Throughout his life, he suffered with severe depression and was completely isolated by the rest of the white community. Despite his good intentions and

and Activist Journalism: Hazel Brannon Smith and the Mississippi Civil Rights Movement (Lanham: University Press of America, 2010); John A. Whalen, *Maverick Among the Magnolias: The Hazel Brannon Smith Story* (Philadelphia: Xlibris, 2002); John T. Kneebone, *Southern Liberal Journalists and the Issue of Race, 1920-1944* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1985); Susan Weill, *In a Madhouse's Din: Civil Rights Coverage by Mississippi's Daily Press, 1948-1968* (Westport: Praeger, 2002).

⁵¹ Rebecca Miller Davis, "Reporting Race and Resistance in Dixie: The White Mississippi Press and Civil Rights, 1944-1964," (PhD Dissertation, University of South Carolina 2011), 507.

⁵² Huey, *Rebel With a Cause*, ix.

⁵³ Morton Sosna, review of *Rebel with a Cause: P.D. East, Southern Liberalism, and the Civil Rights Movement, 1953-1971* by Gary Huey. *The Journal of Southern History*. 52.4 (1986), 656.

⁵⁴ Davies, *The Press and Race*, 4.

⁵⁵ Renee C. Romano and Leigh Raiford, *The Civil Rights Movement in American Memory* (Athens: The University of Georgia Press, 2007), 99.

the desire to improve the lives of others, East's battle against Mississippi's WCC essentially led to his complete destruction.

Percy Dale East was born on November 21, 1921, in Columbia, Mississippi. Just five days old, he was given up for adoption by his biological mother, Laura Battle Hopkins, to James and Bertie East. As his father's career as a mill worker required travelling between various lumber camps in Mississippi, East had lived in eight locations by the time he was seventeen. This lifestyle combined with the hardships of poverty "took a heavy toll" on his personality.⁵⁶ Described as the "saw-mill kid," East felt a constant sense of alienation, viewing himself as a "perpetual outsider."⁵⁷ His disregard for the white South's expectations led to his later characterization as a "professional non-conformist."⁵⁸

In the Deep South's profoundly religious environment, East's beliefs were certainly unconventional. Once when he proudly declared himself an atheist in his high school science class, he became a victim of "ridicule from his teachers as well as his classmates."⁵⁹ After experimenting with Unitarianism and Judaism, East refused to follow any religion for the rest of his life. In doing so, he fostered a reputation for rejecting the core values of traditional southern life. As Huey states, "to question religion was to cast doubt on one of the cornerstones of southern society."⁶⁰ Further cementing this image of dissent, in 1939 East enrolled at Pearl River Junior College in Poplarville, Mississippi where he refused to participate in the compulsory ROTC program. Lacking

⁵⁶ Huey, *Rebel With a Cause*, 32

⁵⁷ *Ibid*, 29.

⁵⁸ East, *The Magnolia Jungle*, 15.

⁵⁹ Huey, *Rebel With a Cause*, 38.

⁶⁰ *Ibid*, 34.

respect for the military, East repeatedly slept through mandatory drill practice. Eventually, he was expelled from the school after calling the colonel a “stupid son of a bitch.”⁶¹ Although East joined the United States Army in 1942, he did not share the same enthusiasm for militarism as many other Southerners. Stationed in North Carolina, East was medically discharged from service in 1942 after experiencing total lapses of memory. But the United States military was not the only American institution he would challenge. In his rejection of religion, the military, and a strict system of racial etiquette, East placed himself firmly on the outskirts of white southern society.

Eventually, East learned to reject strict racial etiquette that dictated life in the Deep South and in Mississippi. In an attempt to restore pre-Civil War authority, a new racial caste system emerged throughout the South in the late nineteenth century. This system of Jim Crow worked to establish the superiority of whites and the inferiority of blacks, just as slavery had previously done. In 1888, the first Jim Crow law segregated railroad coaches. However, the environment intensified in 1890 as Mississippi legislators amended the state constitution.⁶² The “Second Mississippi Plan” cemented African American disfranchisement with literacy tests and the poll tax as voting requirements. Six years later, the Supreme Court decision *Plessy v. Ferguson* allowed racial segregation in public facilities based on a system of “separate but equal.”

Neil McMillen suggests that in Mississippi “the color line was drawn in the attitudes and habits of its people, black and white, well before it was sanctioned by

⁶¹ *Ibid*, 44.

⁶² Nikki L.M. Brown, Barry M. Stentiford, *The Jim Crow Encyclopedia: Volume 1, 2* (Westport CT: Greenwood Press, 2008).

law.”⁶³ Restricted contact between the races was maintained through separate eating spaces, separate recreational facilities, and separate places of education. Throughout daily life, blacks were expected to show whites deference by waiting until they were served, using the back entrances to buildings, and making space on the sidewalk. On the other hand, blacks were treated with no respect as they were denied the courtesy titles, “Mr.” and “Mrs.,” and were required to call their former masters “mister.”⁶⁴ Fear and intimidation were the essential elements that kept the system firmly in place. Lynching and ritualized violence were employed as necessary measures to prevent the threat of African American men’s uncontrollable sexual desire for white women. For white men, these forms of violence existed as “a forum in which to act out their idealized masculine role as protectors while exhibiting to the audience their ability to assert control over white women and African Americans.”⁶⁵

Like other southern parents, East’s mother worked to instill these racial mores that created “distance and hierarchy” between the races.⁶⁶ Despite his mother’s teachings, East rejected the rules of etiquette and often pushed the boundaries of what was acceptable. At one camp, he developed a close friendship with a young African American boy named Tee Williams. When East asked his mother to spend the night at Tee’s home, she refused explaining: “Tee is a nigger. That’s why he can’t spend the night

⁶³ Neil R. McMillen, *Dark Journey: Black Mississippians in the Age of Jim Crow* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1990), 3.

⁶⁴ Jennifer Ritterhouse explores the lessons taught to children in great depth. She argues that racial etiquette resembled the code of slavery in many ways, and it was enforced by a system of racial violence. See: Ritterhouse, *Growing up Jim Crow*, 43.

⁶⁵ Kristina DuRocher, *Raising Racists: The Socialization of White Children in the Jim Crow South* (Lexington: University Press of Kentucky, 2011), 10.

⁶⁶ Ritterhouse, *Growing up Jim Crow*, 27.

and that's all there is to it."⁶⁷ While East understood Southern customs, he refused to distance himself from people simply because of their race.

Between 1935 and 1939, East worked for Jesse Wild's General Merchandise enterprise in Pleasant, Mississippi. Working in Wild's grocery store provided East an opportunity to witness the economic exploitation of African Americans firsthand, and "this deep compassion also nurtured within East a fierce sense of justice and a genuine devotion to its implementation."⁶⁸ Known in the local area for his greed, Wild often cheated customers out of food by filling bags with less weight than he advertised. Wild was particularly unfair toward African Americans, selling melted down ice at the same price as if it were full weight, and he expected his employees to follow his example.

East was not willing to participate in this unfair treatment, and instead attempted to help those he felt were in need. Reared in extreme poverty in Mississippi, East understood struggling for enough food everyday. On one particular occasion, he was caught selling a greater amount of ice to Calvin Jones, an African American Baptist minister. To teach East a lesson, Wild responded violently. East recalled, "I never knew whether his fist or open hand struck me, but he struck, knocking my head against the refrigerator. My ears rang, and tears welled in my eyes. I was hurt physically, as well as hurt from humiliation."⁶⁹ Despite this terrifying incident, East continued to live by his own personal morals.

East's life changed dramatically when he studied journalism at Mississippi Southern College, now The University of Southern Mississippi (USM). After completing

⁶⁷ East, *The Magnolia Jungle*, 40.

⁶⁸ *Ibid*, 71.

⁶⁹ *Ibid*, 66.

his bachelor's degree in 1951, he left the college to edit two labor union newspapers in Hattiesburg, *The Union Review* and *The Local Advocate*.⁷⁰ For the first time, East had a steady career and was able to repay previously accumulated debt. With this newfound financial stability, he found it difficult to remain silent about certain issues as Mississippi's Jim Crow environment intensified. As a result, "his relentless conscience would push him once again into the role of rebel and outcast."⁷¹ In 1953, East took a risk that would change his life forever. Planning to set up his own publication, he withdrew three thousand dollars in savings to establish *The Petal Paper* out of Petal, Mississippi.

In its early years, the newspaper existed solely as a source of financial income. In order to maintain his subscription numbers, he avoided covering issues that could severely divide his audience's opinions. After the U.S. Supreme Court declared segregated public schools unconstitutional in 1954, East remained silent on the matter. Providing a neutral voice on *Brown v. Board* was the safest option for someone wanting to sell newspapers in Mississippi. The Hederman family already had a tight control of the state's news coverage. Their Jackson based publications *The Clarion Ledger* and *Jackson Daily News* supported segregation and the White Citizens' Council (WCC) editorially. Davies suggests that "extensive coverage of the council and its activities by these major daily newspapers provided credibility as well as free advertising."⁷² East's failure explicitly to endorse white supremacy was unusual for the area. Nevertheless, his journey to publicly critique this philosophy and become a full-fledged integrationist was a gradual process. After a series of murders across Mississippi in 1955, East recognized the need to

⁷⁰ Justin Glenn, *The Washingtons: A Family History* (El Dorado Hills: Savas Publishing, 2014), 390.

⁷¹ Huey, *Rebel With a Cause*, 60.

⁷² Davies, *The Press and Race*, 23.

challenge racial injustice more explicitly. *The Petal Paper* would ultimately be used as a forum to promote his unconventional views on race.

In November 1955, the NAACP produced a chilling pamphlet titled, “M is for Mississippi and Murder.”⁷³ Capturing the violent atmosphere in Mississippi at this time, it discussed the details of three racially motivated murders in Mississippi that occurred that year: Reverend George W. Lee in Belzoni, Lamar Smith in Brookhaven, and Emmett Till in Money. On May 7, Lee was killed by two shotgun blasts for leading voter registration efforts in Humphreys County. On August 13, Smith was murdered in broad daylight outside Brookhaven’s courthouse for urging voters to participate in the August 2 primary election. On August 28, fourteen-year-old Till was kidnapped and killed in Money for failing to understand Mississippi’s strict system of racial etiquette. In response, the NAACP pamphlet explained: “These were not murders of passion, or for profit, but futile, cold, brutal murders to bolster a theory of superiority based upon skin color.”⁷⁴ East refused to discuss his personal opinions in the newspaper, but he expressed feelings of shock and outrage in his autobiography.⁷⁵ Ted Ownby has suggested that the events of 1955 generated profound anger and “solidified resistance efforts” in a manner that “proved a turning point.”⁷⁶ As the murders inspired civil rights protests across the South, extensive media coverage revealed Mississippi’s intensely violent atmosphere to the rest of the world.

⁷³ M is for Mississippi and Murder Pamphlet, November 1955. M341. Will D. Campbell Papers. Box 54, Folder 16. McCain Library and Archives, University of Southern Mississippi, Hattiesburg.

⁷⁴ M is for Mississippi and Murder Pamphlet.

⁷⁵ East, *The Magnolia Jungle*, 172.

⁷⁶ Ted Ownby, *The Civil Rights Movement in Mississippi* (University Press of Mississippi, 2013),

East's turning point occurred in March of 1956. After discovering the WCC's plan to establish a chapter in Forrest County, East no longer remained silent. In 1954, the WCC organized in the Delta town of Indianola, Mississippi, to prevent black activism and to maintain the system of segregation. Attempting to spread a message of white supremacy, the organization "printed material, aired television spots, and employed speakers that spread the doctrine of biblically sanctioned black inferiority."⁷⁷ Numan V. Bartley described the Council as "the cutting edge of the drive for regimented orthodoxy."⁷⁸ Attracting those who held respectable positions within the community, its membership often included teachers, police officials, doctors, and members of state and local legislatures. East despised the organization for denying African Americans equal justice under the law and feared that they would attempt to do the same to all of their opponents. As a result, East declared war against them, employing his newspaper as his weapon. His cutting critique of the organization's ideology is perhaps one of his most effective contributions to the civil rights struggle. At this point, East "had become an ally of black Americans and had embarked upon a crusade that would continue for the rest of his life."⁷⁹

East retaliated against the Council's organizing in Hattiesburg by including the controversial "Jackass ad" in the March 15 edition of the *Petal Paper*. This included a fictional Citizens' Council advertisement with a cartoon Jackass that urged readers to join

⁷⁷ Aram Goudsouzian, *Down to the Crossroads: Civil Rights, Black Power, and the Meredith March Against Fear* (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2014), 115.

⁷⁸ Numan V. Bartley, *The Rise of Massive Resistance: Race and Politics in the South During the 1950s* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1999).

⁷⁹ Huey, *Rebel With a Cause*, 60.

the “Citizens’ Clan.”⁸⁰ Other satirical statements included: “Be super-superior”; “This wonderful offer open to white folk only”; “Freedom to be superior without brain, character, or principal”; and “Freedom to take part in the South’s fastest growing business: Bigotry!”⁸¹ East’s taunt did not go unnoticed. The advertisement took center stage at the WCC’s meeting the following week when members demanded that everyone cancel their subscriptions to the *Petal Paper*. Although many advertisers refused to do business with East after this incident, he did not let the controversy halt his activism. This style of satirical journalism would define his work from this point on.

An important aspect of East’s activism was his use of humor to denounce his opponents. Easton King, editor and publisher of *The Chronicle Star* of Pascagoula, Mississippi, suggested that “ridicule is the most effective weapon and so he uses it.”⁸² Another writer for *The Southern Patriot* described East as able to “mow down racism with his sharp mind.”⁸³ East often included fake advertisements to mock the activities of the other more violent white supremacist group, the Ku Klux Klan (KKK). One of these write-ups promoted “pre-soaked kerosene doused, two-by-fours, ideal for cross burnings.”⁸⁴ Another urged readers to purchase cotton eyelet cloth, “ideal for summer Klan uniforms.”⁸⁵

East attacked not only organizations, but also prominent white supremacist leaders. Senator James O. Eastland, a staunch segregationist from Doddsville in the Mississippi Delta, quickly became one of East’s favorite targets. Eastland was a “virulent

⁸⁰ Editorial Reprints from the *Petal Paper*, 1957. M324, P.D. East Collection. Folder 3. McCain Library and Archives, University of Southern Mississippi, Hattiesburg.

⁸¹ Editorial Reprints from *Petal Paper*.

⁸² East, *The Magnolia Jungle*, 9.

⁸³ “East is Dead, but the Petal Paper Lives on,” *The Southern Patriot*. April, 1972.

⁸⁴ East, *The Magnolia Jungle*, 15.

⁸⁵ *Ibid*

racist,” who endorsed the Citizens’ Council and the John Birch Society, a conservative organization that supported anti-communism and limited government intervention.⁸⁶ Committed to maintaining what he viewed as the American way of life, Eastland dedicated his career to the prevention of racial reform. In an extremely sarcastic tone, East frequently referred to Eastland as “Our Gem.”⁸⁷ One article joked, “Senator Eastland is an honest man. After all, out of something like a million Negroes in the state, less than twenty-five thousand can vote.”⁸⁸ Although African Americans were legally allowed to vote, the implementation of the poll tax and literacy tests prevented them from exercising their rights. John Dittmer suggests that by 1954, of approximately 22,000 blacks registered only four percent were eligible to vote.⁸⁹ Through his use of humor, East highlighted this injustice that continued to plague life in the state of Mississippi. In another editorial, East alluded to Senator Eastland when he stated:

In my office there’s a cockroach who is fat, sleek, sassy, and in his infinite stupidity, he seems to think he’s intelligent. To me he seems typical of today’s successful politician, and I have, in honor of a friend whom I admire and respect, named him Jim. Also, in my office there is a mess of tiny ants. They have taken the place, paying no attention to the fact that I have certain rights as the one who pays the rent. They just walk over me like they would over anyone else who happens in. Also, out of respect and admiration, I have named them ‘The State Sovereignty Commission.’ Why don’t I spray and kill them off? Heaven forbid! This state couldn’t operate without cockroaches and ants.⁹⁰

In 1962, East also launched an attack on Hattiesburg’s ardent segregationist, Theron Lynd. Local African Americans often tell stories of this notorious Forrest County registrar, one of the powerful reminders of white supremacy’s continuation. A “three

⁸⁶ Jeff Woods, *Black Struggle, Red Scare: Segregation and Anti-Communism in the South 1948-1968* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana University Press, 2004), 43.

⁸⁷ P.D. East, “Now, Ain’t He a Real Cool Cat, Man! *Petal Paper*. May 31, 1956, 1.

⁸⁸ P.D. East, *Petal Paper*. April 19, 1956, 1.

⁸⁹John Dittmer, *Local People: The Struggle for Civil Rights in Mississippi* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1994), 52.

⁹⁰ P.D. East, *Petal Paper*. June 14, 1956, 1.

hundred pound former football player and proud Citizens' Council member," Lynd frequently refused to register African Americans to vote at the county courthouse.⁹¹ On October 6, 1962, during a Men's Club dinner at Oak Grove Methodist Church, Lynd accused East of being a communist. After hearing about this accusation, East wrote to Lynd with an ultimatum. In a letter on November 26, 1962, East stated:

Within thirty (30) days from the date of this letter I respectfully submit that you do one of two things:

1. Go before the Men's Club of the Oak Grove Methodist church in Lamar County and make an apology for your unfounded and irresponsible statement, made to them on the 6th of October 1962.
2. Prove the truth of your statement, beyond the shadow of doubt.⁹²

East was not afraid to confront prominent members of the white community, despite the potential for violent repercussions. Nevertheless, he continued publicly to embarrass the institution of white supremacy, even as the white opposition led an effort to humiliate him.

Although East's commitment to civil rights activism was limited to his written work, he sometimes participated in other forms of activity. In the early 1960s, he decided to share his story at a series of universities across the United States. In these speeches, East highlighted Mississippi's inequalities to students inside and out of the state. Among the institutions were two liberal arts colleges, Millsaps and Tougaloo, in Jackson, Mississippi. During his trip to the capital, East met local activist and WWII veteran, Medgar Evers. Here, Evers complimented East's work and encouraged him to speak to the local chapter of the NAACP the following spring. East even travelled outside of the

⁹¹ Jon Hale, *The Freedom Schools: Student Activists in the Mississippi Civil Rights Movement* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2016), 58.

⁹² P.D. East to Theron Lynd, November 26, 1962. M324, P.D. East Collection. Folder 1. McCain Library and Archives, University of Southern Mississippi, Hattiesburg.

Deep South, giving one speech at Vassar College, in Poughkeepsie, New York. On December 5, 1962, he spoke on “The Attainment of Distinction.”⁹³ East’s address included a discussion of the hate he had received from the southern white community, along with the challenges he faced as a supporter of African American rights in Mississippi. This particular speech also explained his journey from being a moderate to something a lot more radical. East explained:

I don’t have any regrets, although I am sorry that I had to change ambitions along the way. My first ambition was to be a moderate in Mississippi, a rich moderate, that is. I’ve had to settle for being a man of distinction... There is no place in the nation for slavery, be it economic, political, religious, or in any other form, and its fatness notwithstanding. Yet, we all know that slavery does continue to exist; when men are denied their liberties guaranteed by the law of the land, that constitutes a form of slavery.⁹⁴

As time passed, East recognized that a more assertive stance was required to make a noticeable dent in the armor of the traditional South. Although he admired the contributions from Mississippi moderates Hazel Brannon Smith and Hodding Carter, East believed in committing himself fully to the fight for racial equality.

One of the most fascinating aspects of East’s activism was the extensive network of support that sustained him. While East’s beliefs lost him a large amount of support, he gained a number of new friends. His participation in civil rights activism allowed him to develop relationships with like-minded people throughout the United States such as William Faulkner, Lillian Smith, Hodding Carter, Will Campbell, John Howard Griffith, Medgar Evers, and Steve Allen. Because East is often characterized as an outsider, the network of support that aided in his activism has been forgotten. It is necessary to

⁹³ Address Delivered by P.D. East at Vassar College, December 1962. M324, P.D. East Collection. Folder 1. McCain Library and Archives, University of Southern Mississippi, Hattiesburg.

⁹⁴ Address Delivered by P.D. East at Vassar College.

recognize that East was encouraged by a group of people not only in the South, but also throughout the entire United States. While East drew inspiration from many of these individuals, many viewed him as a mentor and teacher. One of these individuals was University of Mississippi professor and fellow supporter of racial equality, James Wesley Silver.

In 1956, Silver asked East and William Faulkner to form a moderate political group. Silver had already attended three or four meetings at Faulkner's Rowan Oak home in Oxford, Mississippi where they planned "an attempt to ridicule the forces of reaction represented by the Citizens' Council."⁹⁵ As the state's dangerous environment made this interaction almost impossible, the men instead created *The Southern Repose*, "an underground newspaper that satirized segregationists and that was surreptitiously distributed on university campuses throughout Mississippi."⁹⁶ East was responsible for editing and publishing the paper, while Silver provided financial support. On Faulkner's contribution, East joked, "Hell, he didn't even buy the cokes. But it was good to know he was on the same side as I."⁹⁷

Attempting to give hope to others fighting racial inequality in the South, the three men provided a cutting critique of white supremacy. In July 1956, ten thousand copies of the newspaper were printed and distributed, selling for one dollar each.⁹⁸ As the articles resembled East's previous work, several people suspected his involvement in writing the publication. East, of course, denied the accusation despite its accuracy. Although some

⁹⁵ James Wesley Silver, *Running Scared: Silver in Mississippi* (Jackson: University Press of Mississippi, 1984), 60.

⁹⁶ Robert W. Hamblin and Charles A. Peek, *A William Faulkner Encyclopedia* (Westport CT: Greenwood Press, 1999), 352.

⁹⁷ East, *The Magnolia Jungle*, 204.

⁹⁸ Huey, *Rebel With a Cause*, 107.

readers took offense at the paper's satire, the men took pride in the fact that many found their work humorous. Operating for only a couple of months, the newspaper was shut down in October 1956 as it became too expensive to maintain.

While working on *The Southern Reposeure*, East found an ally in Reverend Will Davis Campbell, director of religious life at the University of Mississippi. Ordained as a Baptist minister at the age of seventeen, Campbell was a notable supporter of the Civil Rights Movement in Mississippi. When East, Faulkner, and Silver created *The Southern Reposeure*, Campbell provided them with five hundred stamped envelopes addressed to sympathetic clergymen throughout the state.⁹⁹ Additionally, when East's own newspaper *The Petal Paper* was on the verge of collapse, Campbell contributed significant financial support to keep it alive. He even urged sympathetic church members across the Deep South to help maintain East's voice in Mississippi. In a 1976 interview, Campbell discussed his relationship with East, stating: "He got into some trouble. He was a sort of character, you know. He was sort of an iconoclastic, bombastic guy who latched on to me, or we sort of latched on to one another when I was at Ole Miss."¹⁰⁰ Campbell pointed to his first encounter with East as a decisive moment in his own life, one in which he discovered a Christian approach to social action. Although East and Campbell disagreed about religion, they remained very close friends until East's death.¹⁰¹ Clearly, East found significant support through his friends in academia, the church, and the community of liberal journalists.

⁹⁹ East, *The Magnolia Jungle*, 204.

¹⁰⁰ Will D. Campbell. Interview by Orley B. Caudill. 8 June 1976. Transcript. Center for Oral History and Cultural Heritage (COHCH). McCain Library and Archives, University of Southern Mississippi, Hattiesburg. Mississippi Digital Library, USM Libraries. Web. 16. May. 2016.

¹⁰¹ Merrill M. Hawkins, *Will Campbell: Radical Prophet of the South* (Macon: Mercer University Press, 1997), 63.

At the same time, East's connections extended beyond Mississippi and the Deep South. He developed a particularly close friendship with John Howard Griffin, a journalist and author from Dallas, Texas. The two met through their mutual friend and New York author, Maxwell Geismar. Huey suggests that they "took an instant liking to one another, and over the next thirteen years, East grew closer to Griffin than to any of his other friends. The depth of their relationship made Griffin an invaluable ally."¹⁰²

Griffin is perhaps best known for embarking on a journey to attempt to understand what life was like as an African American in the Deep South. Griffin wrote his famous book *Black Like Me* to document this journey.¹⁰³ Concerned by the rise in African American suicides, Griffin wanted to know what led to this drastic measure. His book explained, "Though we lived side by side throughout the South, communication between the two races had simply ceased to exist... The only way I could see to bridge the gap between us was to become a Negro."¹⁰⁴ Consequently, Griffin visited a dermatologist in New Orleans to temporarily darken the color of his skin. Accompanied by a photographer who documented the entire trip, he then travelled through New Orleans and parts of Mississippi, posing as an African American.

In *Black Like Me*, Griffin wrote extensively about his relationship with P.D. East when he visited Mississippi. At first, Griffin feared that contact with East would put his friend in further danger. He stated, "I knew of one white man in Hattiesburg to whom I might turn for help a newspaperman, P.D. East. But I hesitated to call him. He has been so persecuted for seeking justice in race relations I was afraid my presence anywhere near

¹⁰² Huey, *Rebel With a Cause*, 140.

¹⁰³ John Howard Griffin, *Black Like Me* (Fort Worth: Sepia Publishing Company, 1960).

¹⁰⁴ *Ibid*, 1.

him might further jeopardize him.”¹⁰⁵ Despite the risky environment in Mississippi, Griffin recalled an incident in 1959 when East willingly picked him up in public from a drugstore in Hattiesburg. Griffin explained, “He shook my Negro hand in full view of everyone on the street.”¹⁰⁶ Griffin was surprised at East’s courage in a place where violence was so prevalent. What shocked Griffin the most, however, was East’s isolation from the rest of the white community. This was probably linked to the fact that “people in Hattiesburg always considered him something of a screwball,” emphasizing his characterization as an outsider.¹⁰⁷ The more radical East’s activism became, the more this image intensified.

Like any other activist in Mississippi at this time, East suffered at the hands of those who continued to support segregation. His treatment by the opposition demonstrates that the methods used against blacks and Southern white dissenters were very similar. One of the WCC’s most successful methods was organizing an economic boycott against East’s newspaper. This was his only source of financial income, and the boycott devastated the paper’s profitability. It is therefore evident why economic intimidation was a popular and effective tactic in Mississippi. The WCC often used it “as a proper instrument of retribution, advising that local Councils authorize their Legal Advisory Committees to recommend economic sanctions against troublemakers.”¹⁰⁸ In threatening to jeopardize the ability of many activists to feed their families, they prevented individuals from participating in activism in the first place. East, however, took

¹⁰⁵ *Ibid*, 71.

¹⁰⁶ *Ibid*, 72.

¹⁰⁷ East, *The Magnolia Jungle*, xi.

¹⁰⁸ Numan Bartley, *The Rise of Massive Resistance: Race and Politics in the South During the 1950s* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1997), 193.

the risk. As a result, he lost all 2,300 local subscribers and most of his advertisers by 1959.¹⁰⁹ In the end, the paper managed to survive only because of subscription drives and donations from liberal supporters such as the NAACP's assistant secretary, Roy Wilkins.

Like other activists, East was also watched closely by Mississippi's own spy agency, the Mississippi State Sovereignty Commission. This state agency worked to gather information on individuals who might be participating in civil rights activities, working with communists, or posing a threat to the system of segregation. One of the organization's reports that traced East's activity explained:

Attention has been called to this paper and to the publisher, Mr. East, on several occasions to the effect that the paper advocates integration and is very liberal minded. Recommendation: Further efforts should be made to determine background information relative to Percy Dale East and just what he might be endeavoring to do at Petal, Mississippi. Any connection he might have with the NAACP should be developed. It has also been indicated that he might have an interest in the Communist Party.¹¹⁰

Placed under close surveillance by agents of the Sovereignty Commission, East received a series of concerning threats. The number of these increased dramatically after publishing the "Jackass ad" in 1956. His willingness publicly to critique the Council caught their attention. In his autobiography, East admitted, "Immediately following the issue of March 25, my telephone rang a few times, and I was greeted by unidentified persons, one or two seeing fit to let me know they considered me a 'nigger-loving, Jew-

¹⁰⁹ Huey, *Rebel With a Cause*.

¹¹⁰ Memo from Zack J. Van LANDINGHAM about Percy Dale East, August 25, 1959. Mississippi State Sovereignty Commission Records, 1994-2006, Mississippi Department of Archives and History, May 16, 2016.

loving, Communist son-of-a-bitch.”¹¹¹ Fearing for his life, East began carrying a weapon. He explained: “As the weeks passed my apprehension grew... While I have never held with firearms, I felt it be wise to have a pistol within my reach. For the second time in my life I purchased a weapon, a .38 mm. Luger, which I put in the glove compartment of my car.”¹¹² In recent years, historians have placed armed resistance at the center of the Civil Rights Movement, arguing that this should be considered “critical to the efficiency of the Southern freedom struggle.”¹¹³ East’s belief in armed self-defense reflects the prevalence of civil rights activists in the possession of weapons. This theme is recurrent, particularly in Buford Posey’s experience in Neshoba County.

According to Todd Moyer, “to become a civil rights activist in most parts of the South during this period was, by definition, to put your family and your livelihood at risk.”¹¹⁴ If so, East fits this description almost perfectly. Many times East’s family feared for their lives. One of the most concerning moments occurred after the lynching of Mack Charles Parker in Poplarville, Mississippi, in 1959. After being accused of raping a pregnant white girl, the African American was “dragged from his jail cell and murdered by a mob, which then threw his body into the Pearl River.”¹¹⁵ Fearing violent retribution, East’s wife, Billie Porter, fled from their home in Hattiesburg to spend the night with a

¹¹¹ East, *The Magnolia Jungle*, 180.

¹¹² East, *The Magnolia Jungle*, 182.

¹¹³ Akinyele Omowale Umoja, *We Will Shoot Back: Armed Resistance in the Mississippi Freedom Movement* (New York: New York University Press, 2013), 2. Other works that focus on armed resistance in the Civil Rights Movement include: Charles E. Cobb Jr., *This Nonviolent Stuff’ll Get You Killed: How Guns Made the Civil Rights Movement Possible* (New York: Basic Books, 2014); Lance Hill, *Deacons For Defense: Armed Resistance and the Civil Rights Movement* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2004); Timothy B. Tyson, *Radio Free Dixie: Robert F. Williams and the Roots of Black Power* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2001).

¹¹⁴ Moyer, *Let The People Decide*, 152.

¹¹⁵ Barbara Ransby, *Ella Baker and the Black Freedom Movement: A Radical Democratic Vision* (Chapel Hill: The University of North Carolina Press, 2005), 212.

friend. She was certain that East would be the next target. In the May 28 edition of the *Petal Paper*, East stated, “The Act committed against Mack Parker represents a very real threat to the safety and security of every individual citizen of the nation. Who can feel safe and secure in his own house, no matter where he lives so long as a man can be taken from the law and murdered?”¹¹⁶

Oddly, the *Petal Paper* had long been the forum for the expression of East’s activism. As the Civil Rights Movement escalated to new heights in the early 1960s, the newspaper quickly became the vehicle for East’s long mental and physical deterioration. Following the death of Mack Charles Parker, East’s depression deepened, and he found it particularly difficult to deal with hatred from former friends. Every time he left the house, “his stomach tightened into a knot, in anticipation of the personal snubs he would receive.”¹¹⁷ Despite becoming increasingly more reclusive, “neither threats nor punishments could weaken his commitment to justice.”¹¹⁸ East continued the fight.

In the early 1960s, East caught the attention of the Mississippi Sovereignty Commission once again. Recognized as a troublemaker throughout the state, East’s name was even used in one of the WCC’s smear campaigns against a young white journalist, Billy C. Barton. In 1961, the twenty-two year old University of Mississippi student decided to run in the election for editor of their student newspaper, *The Mississippian*. During the Summer of 1960, the Sovereignty Commission obtained information revealing that Barton had covered one of Atlanta’s civil rights sit-ins when working as an

¹¹⁶ P.D. East, *Petal Paper*. May 28, 1959, 1.

¹¹⁷ Huey, *Rebel With a Cause*, 94.

¹¹⁸ *Ibid*, 71.

intern for the *Atlanta Journal*.¹¹⁹ Concerned about his “liberal tendencies,” the commission reported “Barton is well regarded in left-wing circles as a promising young man.”¹²⁰ Aiming to prevent his success in the election, they attempted to link the Ole Miss student to P.D. East.

A letter from Citizens’ Council member W.J. Simmons on August 17, 1960, claimed, “We have a full file on East’s activities, which are intended to be extremely harmful to the best interests of Mississippi... Barton plans to leave Atlanta next week and visit East at Petal or Hattiesburg before school opens.”¹²¹ Suspecting dishonesty, one of East’s friends and professors at the University of Mississippi, James W. Silver, decided to conduct his own investigation. Eventually, he discovered that East in fact “had never heard of Barton.”¹²² As East was extremely reclusive at this point, it is unlikely that he made plans to meet anyone in the first place. For Charles Bolton, this incident demonstrates the Sovereignty Commission’s capacity for “gross fabrications and crossing the line of decency.”¹²³ The fact that East was involved in the incident demonstrates his famed reputation throughout the state. Nonetheless, after this scandal, East appeared to fade into obscurity.

Despite his increasing anonymity, East’s efforts continued to be quietly supported. As late as December 22, 1961, he received a letter from Eugene DiMattina of DiMattina Supply Company in Brooklyn, New York. In this, the businessman enclosed \$31 dollars, \$5 for a one-year subscription to the Petal Paper, \$1 for reprints from the

¹¹⁹ W.J. Simmons to Honorable Albert Jones, August 17, 1960. Mississippi State Sovereignty Commission Records, 1994-2006, Mississippi Department of Archives and History, May 16, 2016.

¹²⁰ Charles C. Bolton, *William F. Winter and the New Mississippi: A Biography* (Jackson: University Press of Mississippi, 2013) 114.

¹²¹ W.J. Simmons to Honorable Albert Jones.

¹²² Bolton, *William F. Winter and the New Mississippi*, 114.

¹²³ *Ibid*, 115.

Petal Paper, and \$25, he stated, “To help you to continue your fine work.”¹²⁴ DiMattina was particularly complimentary of East’s contribution and was willing to help. He closed his letter saying, “It would be my pleasure to shake your hand personally the next time you’re in New York.”¹²⁵ P.D. East replied, “I’m deeply grateful to you, not just for your check, but for the simple fact that someone is concerned.”¹²⁶ The fact that someone was willing to support East financially when most people had given up came as a great shock. At this point, things were getting progressively worse.

Fearing imminent violence after James Meredith’s integration of the University of Mississippi, East fled the state in December 1963. After settling in Fairhope, Alabama, he continued to work on his newspaper until his death from liver failure on December 31, 1971. East’s commitment to the fight for racial equality cost him a normal life and a traditional family. He was simply repaid with “hatred, humiliation, and devastating financial reprisals.”¹²⁷ Nonetheless, his existence “provided evidence that the white South was not a conservative, racist monolith that spoke with a single voice.”¹²⁸ Since his childhood, East recognized the need to eradicate racial inequality. Although his journey toward activism was complex, it demonstrated the potential for alternative ideas in the Deep South. One correspondent from the *Atlanta Staff* captured East’s contribution particularly well when he described the *Petal Paper* in the following manner: “It is not big. It is not particularly well written. But it is nonetheless an important factor in

¹²⁴ Eugene DiMattina to P.D. East, December 22, 1961. M324, P.D. East Collection. Folder 1. McCain Library and Archives, University of Southern Mississippi, Hattiesburg.

¹²⁵ *Ibid*

¹²⁶ P.D. East to Eugene DiMattina. Undated. M324, P.D. East Collection. Folder 1. McCain Library and Archives, University of Southern Mississippi, Hattiesburg.

¹²⁷ Letter to friends from John Howard Griffin, undated. M324, P.D. East Collection. Folder 1. McCain Library and Archives, University of Southern Mississippi, Hattiesburg.

¹²⁸ Huey, *Rebel With a Cause*, 2.

Mississippi, if for no other reason that it is the only paper to speak up with pleas for a fair shake for Mississippi's big Negro population."¹²⁹

Overall, East's decision to publicly tackle the South's system of white supremacy defines his civil rights activism. Although he may not have made significant changes for African Americans at the grassroots like Ralph Noonkester and Buford Posey, East's commitment to justice in Mississippi's deeply oppressive environment speaks volumes. In challenging the WCC and other powerful groups in Mississippi, East offered his contribution to the Civil Rights Movement. Examining his unusual journey sheds light on many aspects of Southern white activism: how it developed, how it was maintained, and how other whites responded to it.

¹²⁹ East, *The Magnolia Jungle*, 14.

CHAPTER III - BUFORD POSEY: “NOT TIMID, NOR SHY.”

On March 13, 1958, the *Neshoba Democrat*'s editor, Jack Tannehill, received a letter that sparked one of the most explosive feuds in Neshoba County history.¹³⁰ Categorized simply as a local “eccentric,” the author, Buford W. Posey, had already raised eyebrows for supporting Harry S. Truman in the 1948 presidential race.¹³¹ Ten years later, Posey's written attack on Tannehill struck at the heart of the white supremacist order. Identifying openly as a “sincere liberal,” Posey positioned himself against the White Citizens' Council (WCC) member, and others who supported segregation in the community.¹³² In challenging this entrenched system, Posey blurred the lines as a white southerner. His stand, nonetheless, was not without repercussions. Less than a year after sending the letter, Posey had been fined \$329, placed in solitary confinement, and had his Mississippi citizenship removed.¹³³

Posey's confrontation attracted significant attention, but the situation intensified when he allegedly demanded that Tannehill “choose his weapons.”¹³⁴ “I got fed up with

¹³⁰ Buford Posey, “Not Timid, Nor Shy,” *Neshoba Democrat*, March 13, 1958.

¹³¹ Florence Mars, *Witness in Philadelphia* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1977), 95. Florence Latimer Mars was another white Southerner who fought for racial equality in Neshoba County, but her voice is more familiar than Posey's. In her autobiographical book, Mars discusses the effects of the 1964 Freedom Summer murders on Philadelphia, along with her own civil rights activities. She mentions Posey briefly in relation to the information he gave to the FBI and his 1964 interview with NBC news.

¹³² Posey, “Not Timid, Nor Shy.”

¹³³ Buford Posey, “My Battle with the White Citizens' Councils,” *American Socialist*, October, 1959, 18. In one 1963 Sovereignty Commission report, investigator A.L. Hopkins revisited the incident and claimed that the authority for Posey's disenfranchisement was based on Section 19 of the Mississippi Constitution that states the following, “Human life shall not be imperiled by the practice of dueling; and any citizen of this state who shall hereafter fight a duel, or assist in the same as second, or send, accept, or knowingly carry a challenge therefore, whether such an act be done in the state, or out of it, or who shall go out of the state to fight a duel, or to assist in the same as second, or to send, accept, or carry a challenge, shall be disqualified from holding any office under this Constitution, and shall be disenfranchised.” See: Mississippi State Sovereignty Commission, “Report by A.L. Hopkins”, April 25, 1963. Series 2515: Mississippi State Sovereignty Commission Records, 1994-2006, Mississippi Department of Archives and History, March 20, 2016.

¹³⁴ *Baltimore Sun*, April 21, 1958.

all this,” he explained, “and since the White Citizens’ Council leaders were claiming that I did not believe in southern Principles, I invited the two of them, Richardson and Tannehill, to settle the matter with me in the noblest Southern tradition, to wit: dueling with shotguns or pistols.”¹³⁵ Posey did not mean for his challenge to be taken literally. Instead, by invoking “an honorable southern custom,” he intended to mock expectations of traditional “manly” behavior.¹³⁶ The sarcasm was lost on Tannehill, who filed a complaint that landed Posey in a Justice of the Peace Court.¹³⁷ Several weeks later, Hal C. De Cell, a Delta newspaperman, warned Governor J.P. Coleman that Posey had created “a potentially explosive situation” in Philadelphia that could provoke a backlash.¹³⁸ Posey’s relationship with the white community was never the same again. Although many continued to view him as the “village idiot,” his interaction with Tannehill demonstrated his willingness to confront persisting injustice in Mississippi. From this point, Posey was considered a serious threat to the established order of white society.¹³⁹

Posey’s stand against the Neshoba County community is an important yet neglected part of Mississippi’s civil rights history. Inserting his story into the larger picture enhances an understanding of what activism meant to white southerners and how they were engaged in it. For a long time, the history of activism in Neshoba County has been defined by the 1964 Freedom Summer murders. In placing this event at the center of

¹³⁵ Posey, “My Battle with the White Citizens,” 18.

¹³⁶ *Delaware County Times*, April 28, 1958.

¹³⁷ *Chicago Daily Tribune*, May 3, 1958.

¹³⁸ Hal. C. De Cell to Governor James P. Coleman. April 7, 1958. Series 2515: Mississippi State Sovereignty Commission Records, 1994-2006, Mississippi Department of Archives and History, February 26, 2016.

¹³⁹ Jerry Mitchell, “77 year old recalls slayings of ’64 in Mississippi,” *Clarion Ledger*, June 12, 2003.

the narrative, historians including Bruce Watson, Don Mitchell and Doug McAdam have neglected a longer history of civil rights involvement.¹⁴⁰ Posey did not participate in activism solely at the most volatile moments of American history. His challenge was persistent, beginning as early as the 1940s. In looking closely at this extended timeline, it is clear that one of Posey's most effective contributions was his ability to garner outside media attention over a long period of time. For example, the story of his feud with Tannehill in 1956 reached large publications in Baltimore, Chicago, Texas and even Los Angeles.¹⁴¹ Like P.D. East, this ability should be considered as an important part of his activism. As Posey drew attention to inequalities in Neshoba County, he demonstrated the need for other community members to stand up against the system of segregation.

Unlike many whites whose ideas about race were driven by their religious beliefs, Posey was not affiliated with any church. Instead, he represented a new model of civil rights activism, one that intersected with his political beliefs as a socialist. Besides emphasizing the powerful connections between socialism and the Civil Rights Movement, this fresh insight demonstrates the potential for homegrown radicalism in the Deep South. In combining Posey's participation with P.D. East and Ralph Noonkester, it is possible to emphasize further the diverse nature of southern white activism in the larger Civil Rights Movement.

¹⁴⁰ Bruce Watson, *Freedom Summer: The Savage Season of 1964 That Made Mississippi Burn and Made America a Democracy* (New York: Penguin, 2011); Don Mitchell, *The Freedom Summer Murders* (New York: Scholastic Press Publishing, 2014); Doug McAdam, *Freedom Summer* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1988).

¹⁴¹ Some of the out of state newspapers that reported this story include: *The Baltimore Sun*, April 21, 1958; *Los Angeles Times*, April 21, 1958; *Chicago Daily Tribune*, May 3, 1958; *Delaware County Times*, April 28, 1958; *Lubbock Avalanche Journal*, May 4, 1958; *The Amarillo Globe-Times*, April 21, 1958.

When searching for gaps in movement history, Steve Estes has suggested “though the vast majority of white Mississippians vehemently opposed civil rights, a small group of white moderates in the state has subsequently fallen through the cracks of history.”¹⁴² Historians have recently worked to incorporate these moderates into their accounts, and Ted Ownby argues “some of the best scholarship in recent years analyzes shifting strategies and allegiances among white southerners.”¹⁴³ Despite this important inclusion, the stories of men like Posey continue to be dismissed as aberrations. As demonstrated by East’s story, others with similar experiences existed throughout Mississippi. The challenges they posed to the entrenched system of white supremacy deserve greater inclusion in a larger understanding of civil rights activism.

One of the most fascinating parts of Posey’s story is the way it sheds light on the potential for radicalism in an environment where whiteness and racism were synonymous. Southern whites did participate in civil rights activism, and their experiences are worthy of greater attention. Despite being recognized in Neshoba County as a controversial figure, Posey remains relatively unstudied. A few scholars have briefly mentioned his experience in relation to Chaney, Goodman and Schwerner’s murders, but his longer history of activism is yet to be traced.¹⁴⁴ Posey’s contribution to the Movement

¹⁴² Steve Estes. *I am A Man!: Race, Manhood, and the Civil Rights Movement*. (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2005), 77.

¹⁴³ Ted Ownby, *The Civil Rights Movement in Mississippi* (University Press of Mississippi, 2013), x.

¹⁴⁴ The following works have briefly mentioned Posey, mainly in relation to the 1964 Freedom Summer murders See: Bob Zellner, *The Wrong Side of Murder Creek: A White Southerner in the Freedom Movement* (Montgomery: NewSouth Books, 2008); Watson. *Freedom Summer*; Florence Mars, *Witness in Philadelphia*; Michael Newton, *The Ku Klux Klan in Mississippi: A History* (Jefferson: McFarland); Seth Cagin and Phillip Dray, *We Are Not Afraid: The Story of Goodman, Schwerner, and Chaney and the Civil Rights Campaign for Mississippi* (New York: Macmillan, 1988); Willie Morris. *The Courting of Marcus Dupree* (Jackson: University Press of Mississippi, 1992).

should be considered more than a “curious footnote.”¹⁴⁵ Placing his life as an activist at the center, this chapter uses his story to enrich an understanding of the Neshoba County community, southern white activism, and the larger fight for African American equality. Through the eyes of this white southerner, new figures, events, and sources emerge. The chapter begins by providing context about the environment in which Posey was raised, it then explores the different ways he engaged in activism, and it concludes by looking at the response of the rest of the white community he challenged.

On August 18, 1925, Buford Wallace Posey was born to Emma and Vance Posey in Philadelphia, Mississippi. During his early childhood, the United States entered an increasingly turbulent period that culminated in the Great Mississippi Flood of 1927, and the Great Depression in 1929. With local economies thrown into deep recession, farmers struggled to maintain the plummeting prices for agricultural produce.¹⁴⁶ Haunted by uncertainty, individuals living in rural parts of the Deep South clung to fundamental beliefs about how society should be ordered. The effects of this process were particularly prevalent in Posey’s birthplace of Philadelphia, a small town situated in the heart of Neshoba County.

Since Neshoba County’s founding in 1833, its population has consisted of mostly “white, Anglo-Saxon Protestants.”¹⁴⁷ Despite situated originally in the middle of the Choctaw Nation, the local population of Indigenous Peoples were relocated to Oklahoma after the passing of the Indian Removal Act in 1830. Eager to make a living out of cotton and subsistence farming, white settlers soon arrived in the early part of the nineteenth

¹⁴⁵ Joe Atkin, “The Ghosts of Buford Posey: A Civil Rights Legend,” *Hattiesburg American*, September 4, 1995, 5.

¹⁴⁶ George Pabis, *Daily Life along the Mississippi* (Westport, CT: Greenwood Press, 2007), 178.

¹⁴⁷ Mars, *Witness in Philadelphia*.

century to set up their own communities. In the years following the Civil War, little migration into the county resulted in a remarkably low percentage of African-Americans. In fact, the population of Neshoba County did not diversify noticeably until industrialization had a far-reaching impact with the introduction of the railroad in 1905.¹⁴⁸ Florence Mars, a local woman born two years before Posey, claims that “the relatively low percentage of Negroes, and a population of Choctaws did not hit a thousand until 1950.”¹⁴⁹ In her own autobiographical account in *Witness in Philadelphia*, Mars sheds further light on the community’s race relations leading up to this point.¹⁵⁰ For her, Neshoba County celebrated what it considered good race relations, and African Americans were viewed simply as “a smiling, carefree people who accepted their place of inferiority in society.”¹⁵¹ For a long time, no serious threats were posed to the established system of segregation.

The arrival of newcomers with the railroad in the late nineteenth century was an unsettling moment for prominent members of the community. According to Trent Watts, this sentiment led to the creation of arguably the most powerful symbol of the local area: the Neshoba County Fair.¹⁵² Established in 1889, the fair assembled large groups of people to enjoy food, agriculture, and various forms of social entertainment. After listening to the Governor’s speech, attendees had the opportunity to enjoy amateur performances, horse races, and beauty contests. Looking closely at the racial hierarchy of the event, Watts suggests that its creation was ultimately part of a larger endeavor “to

¹⁴⁸ Trent Watts, “Mississippi’s Giant House Party: Being White at the Neshoba County Fair,” *Southern Cultures*. 8.2. (2002): 38.

¹⁴⁹ Mars. *Witness in Philadelphia*, 1.

¹⁵⁰ *Ibid*

¹⁵¹ *Ibid*, 12.

¹⁵² Watts, “Mississippi’s Giant House Party”: 38.

affirm the equality and dignity of white Neshoba Countians who felt threatened by their black neighbors' attempts to claim some measure of equality."¹⁵³ As it existed exclusively for the white community's entertainment, the fair gave power to the Jim Crow system that soon governed interactions between whites and blacks across the South.¹⁵⁴ Understanding the fair's essence, particularly as a powerful pillar of white supremacy, offers an insight into the nature of the community in which Posey was born and raised. This is important to consider as Spencer J. Clark states, "Southern White activists realized to change their society would require a commitment to changing the practices of everyday southern life."¹⁵⁵

Held in August shortly before the state's Democratic primary, the fair offered a political forum as well as an occasion for family entertainment.¹⁵⁶ Attracted by the fair's large crowds, political speakers viewed this event as an opportunity to gain further support for their campaigns. Famed Mississippi politician Theodore G. Bilbo used this to his own political advantage as he served twice as the state's governor, 1916-1920 and 1928-1932. Described as "the champion of the state's poor whites and an ardent white supremacist," Bilbo dominated Mississippi politics as Posey grew up.¹⁵⁷ Armed with a powerful program of economic populism, Bilbo won widespread support among poor white farmers throughout the state.¹⁵⁸ His platform was particularly appealing to those

¹⁵³ Trent Watts, *One Homogenous People: Narrative of White Southern Identity, 1890-1920*. (Knoxville: University of Tennessee Press, 2010), 143.

¹⁵⁴ Watts, "Mississippi's Giant House Party": 38.

¹⁵⁵ Spencer J. Clark, "White Involvement in the Civil Rights Movement" *American Educational History Journal* 36 (2009): 378.

¹⁵⁶ Watts, "Mississippi's Giant House party": 38.

¹⁵⁷ John Dittmer, *Local People: The Struggle for Civil Rights in Mississippi* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1994), 2.

¹⁵⁸ Robert L. Fleegler, "Theodore G. Bilbo and the Decline of Public Racism, 1938-1946. *Journal of Mississippi History* (2006): 5.

experiencing the financial instability of the 1920s. For one Neshoba County resident, William Howard Cole, hearing Bilbo's "powerful oratory skills" stuck out vividly in his memories of attending the fair as a young boy.¹⁵⁹ Through making an appeal to "the white man's government of Mississippi," Bilbo's use of rhetoric reinforced an exclusive southern white identity. At the heart of this, Watts argues, was the notion that whites were "one people bound by a shared history, a love of family, home, and community, and an uncompromising belief in white supremacy."¹⁶⁰

In recent years, historians of whiteness have included a discussion of the Jim Crow South, emphasizing the role that a romanticized language of the Old South and a system of racial violence played in constructing this particular identity. While this persuasive narrative of whiteness, as explained by Grace Elizabeth Hale, persisted in Neshoba County's politics, culture, and social settings, Posey's life represents the potential for deviance from this model.¹⁶¹ He was born and raised in this environment, yet transcended this way of thinking. Rather than supporting the system of segregation, Posey's activism worked towards its complete dismantling. Although the answer is not

¹⁵⁹ William Howard Cole. Interview by Larry Morrissey. 25 July 2007. Transcript. Center for Oral History and Cultural Heritage (COHCH). McCain Library and Archives, University of Southern Mississippi, Hattiesburg. Mississippi Digital Library, USM Libraries. Web. 24. February. 2016.

¹⁶⁰ Watts, *One Homogenous People*, xvi.

¹⁶¹ Grace Elizabeth Hale was one of the first historians to look at the construction of a white identity in the South. In her study, Hale applies a cultural lens to enhance our understanding of Jim Crow's formation in the years 1890-1940. She argues that segregation should be viewed as a modern creation that emerged after the Civil War. In an attempt to restore pre-war authority, whites created a common whiteness that was based on a romanticized image of the Old South, and this infiltrated all aspects of American culture. See: Grace Elizabeth Hale, *Making Whiteness: The Culture of Segregation in the South 1890, 1940* (New York: Pantheon Books), 1998. Other important works that trace the creation of a modern Southern white identity include: Cynthia Skove Nevels, *Lynching to Belong: Claiming Whiteness Through Racial Violence* (College Station: Texas A&M University Press, 2007); James C. Cobb, *Away Down South: A History of Southern Identity* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2007); Jennifer Ritterhouse, *Growing up Jim Crow: How Black and White Southern Children Learned Race* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2006); Kristina DuRocher, *Raising Racists: The Socialization of White Children in the Jim Crow South* (Lexington: University Press of Kentucky, 2011); Nell Irvin Painter, *The History of White People* (New York: W.W. Norton & Company, 2010); Watts, *One Homogenous People*.

always clear, it is important to consider what led certain individuals to develop different ideologies, particularly in a place that has been described as “very backward and very isolated.”¹⁶²

Posey’s belief system was first nurtured within his family home. Historians have long debated the political significance of this space. Robin Kelley suggests that the family, in particular, should be viewed as “central (if not the central) institution where political ideologies are formed and reproduced.”¹⁶³ More recently, Jennifer Ritterhouse places this idea at the center of her book *Growing up Jim Crow: How Black and White Southern Children Learned Race*. Ritterhouse contends that racial views in the Deep South were taught in the home and “to navigate the violence of the Jim Crow system, white children were taught to forget alternatives to white supremacy.”¹⁶⁴ One of the most effective ways in doing so was preventing interaction between the races at a young age.

Posey did not forget the necessity for racial equality, and, instead, went on to develop seriously radical views about race. As he grew older and interacted with other whites, Posey recognized that his upbringing was different than his peers. Unlike many other members of his local community, he was not exposed to the ideas of hatred that are considered to facilitate the development of extremist racist beliefs. His family, he

¹⁶² Florence Mars. Interview by Thomas James Healy. 5 January 1978. Transcript. Center for Oral History and Cultural Heritage (COHCH). McCain Library and Archives, University of Southern Mississippi, Hattiesburg. Mississippi Digital Library, USM Libraries. Web. 20. March. 2016.

¹⁶³ Robin Kelley, “We Are Not What We Seem: Rethinking Black Working-Class Opposition in the Jim Crow South,” *Journal of American History* 80 (1993): 82.

¹⁶⁴ Ritterhouse, *Growing up Jim Crow*.

described, were “too damn busy to hate.”¹⁶⁵ Posey often found it difficult to believe that people were brought up to hate the way they did in Mississippi.¹⁶⁶

One of the most transformative figures in his early life was his mother.¹⁶⁷ Emma Posey’s career as a schoolteacher had a significant impact in the education of her own children. Recognizing the value of teaching young children to read, Emma encouraged a love of books between Buford Posey and his siblings. Despite loathing the traditional school environment, Posey was always an avid reader because of his mother’s influence. To support his ever-growing thirst for knowledge, Posey recalled her buying all the books he ever desired. It is therefore likely that his interest in history was nourished initially through a love for reading. Posey was more politically aware than most children his age, and he held an unusually extensive knowledge of the world around him. At thirteen, he demonstrated this awareness in a letter to the editor of the *Southern Agriculture Magazine*.¹⁶⁸ As Posey warned about a future war between the United States, Japan and Germany, he demonstrated a level of understanding about the emerging political turmoil on the international stage.¹⁶⁹

Reading introduced Posey to ideas that were taboo in segregated Mississippi schools at this time, particularly as they continued to teach children that “the white civilization of the South was one of the greatest in the history of the world. Negro culture

¹⁶⁵ Buford Posey. Interview by Curtis J. Austin. 21 January 2003. Transcript. Center for Oral History and Cultural Heritage (COHCH). McCain Library and Archives, University of Southern Mississippi, Hattiesburg. Mississippi Digital Library, USM Libraries. Web. 18. March. 2016.

¹⁶⁶ *Ibid*

¹⁶⁷ *Ibid*

¹⁶⁸ *Ibid*

¹⁶⁹ *Ibid*

was primitive and greatly inferior.”¹⁷⁰ While the reasons behind his initial attraction to the socialist movement are unknown, it is likely that being immersed in literature from a young age aided his intellectual development. At the age of fourteen, Posey joined the Young People’s Socialist League, the official youth arm of the Socialist Party of America.¹⁷¹ In doing so, he took the first step in what would become a life-long commitment to political activism.

Posey’s childhood was critical in developing his unique worldview, but it is possible to identify a specific moment that led to a more profound awakening. This happened when he returned from service in the Second World War. Some historians view the conflict as the most decisive motivating factor in the political activism of African Americans, emphasizing the “unprecedented political opportunities” that resulted throughout the South.¹⁷² This is part of the larger historical debate that considers “activism as part of a continuum with a longer history.”¹⁷³ For Ted Ownby, extending the time period is particularly important because it “allows a greater understanding of the roots of very different activists.”¹⁷⁴

¹⁷⁰ Mars, *Witness in Philadelphia*, 12. Mars was born two years before Posey, but it is likely that they were educated in a similar time and place.

¹⁷¹ Posey. Interview by Curtis J. Austin.

¹⁷² Timothy B. Tyson. “Robert F. Williams, Black Power, and the Roots of the African American Freedom Struggle,” *The Journal of American History*. 85:2 (1998): 544. Some of the other important works that stress earlier roots of the Civil Rights Movement and recognize the importance of the Second World War in the fight for African American equality include: Adam Fairclough, *Race and Democracy: The Civil Rights Struggle in Louisiana, 1915-1972* (Athens: University of Georgia Press, 1995); Adam Fairclough, *Better Day Coming: Blacks and Equality, 1890-2000* (New York: Penguin Books, 2001); Dittmer. *Local People*; Glenda Gilmore, *Defying Dixie: The Radical Roots of Civil Rights, 1919-1950* (New York: W.W. Norton & Company, 2008); Jacqueline Dowd Hall, “The Long Civil Rights Movement and the Political Uses of the Past,” *Journal of American History* 91 (2005); Mark R. Schneider, *We Return Fighting: The Civil Rights Movement in the Jazz Age* (Boston: Northeastern University Press, 2002); Stephen Tuck, *We Ain’t What We Ought to Be: The Black Freedom Struggle from Emancipation to Obama*, (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2010).

¹⁷³ Ownby, *The Civil Rights Movement in Mississippi*, viii.

¹⁷⁴ *Ibid*, x.

After fighting for freedom overseas, both Medgar Evers and Robert F. Williams were among the many men who hoped to secure their own rights as they returned to the United States.¹⁷⁵ Membership in the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP) “grew by leaps and bounds in the post-war years as black people across the South organized in protest of segregation.”¹⁷⁶ Although specific details about Posey’s military experience are unknown, he returned feeling dissatisfied with persisting racial inequality in Mississippi. In one interview he stated, “We fought for democracy and we don’t have it in the United States.”¹⁷⁷ While Posey enjoyed the benefits of a white southerner, his experience in the U.S. Army fostered a more powerful desire to help others.

Recognizing that African American veterans deserved the right to vote in the country they had risked their lives to defend, Posey paid the ten-dollar fee in 1946 to join the local chapter of the NAACP in Neshoba County. When discussing his visit to the field secretary’s office at the headquarters in Jackson, Posey recalled vividly the look of shock on Myrlie Evers’s face.¹⁷⁸ Surprised to see a white Southerner in her husband Medgar’s office, Myrlie assumed that Posey intended to cause trouble. Her reaction was understandable as in Mississippi in the late 1940s, the potential for white and black cooperation would have seemed highly unlikely. But Posey genuinely wanted to join the fight for racial equality. In fact, he would go on to develop a close friendship with Medgar’s brother, Charles Evers, and they were often referred to as “the two most hated

¹⁷⁵ Dittmer. *Local People*.

¹⁷⁶ Steve Estes, “A Question of Honor: Masculinity and Massive Resistance” in *White Masculinity in the Recent South*, ed. Trent Watts (Baton Rouge: University of Louisiana Press): 102.

¹⁷⁷ Posey. Interview by Curtis J. Austin.

¹⁷⁸ Buford Posey. Interview by Wesley French. 12 October 2007. Transcript. Center for Oral History and Cultural Heritage (COHCH). McCain Library and Archives, University of Southern Mississippi, Hattiesburg. Mississippi Digital Library, USM Libraries. Web. 12. January. 2016.

men in Mississippi.”¹⁷⁹ Today, Posey is remembered as the first white member of the Neshoba County NAACP chapter, and he remained in the organization until his death in 2015.

Individuals affiliated with the Civil Rights Movement were targeted by both violent and economic intimidation. White activists were also victim to these methods of exploitation. Of course, journalist P.D. East was threatened financially when the WCC boycotted his newspaper and business. Like East, Posey experienced his own difficulties when searching for employment within the state. Despite graduating from the University of Southern Mississippi (USM) in 1951 with a degree in history and a license to teach, Posey could not find a position as a high school history teacher. Conveniently, “nobody wanted to hire an agitator.”¹⁸⁰ In reality, Posey’s unsuccessful job search had nothing to do with his competence. Instead, members of the white community had worked to tarnish his reputation among potential employers. In one of the later reports conducted by the Mississippi Sovereignty Commission, the local sheriff E.G. Barnett described Posey as “very unreliable” and claimed “he personally would not trust him with anything.”¹⁸¹ Barnett went on to suggest that Posey “might be weak in the head.”¹⁸² Clearly, Posey was an intelligent and qualified man. The problem was he openly challenged the whites with power in Neshoba County.

Luckily for Posey, he was part of a company in the U.S. Army that received monetary compensation for an incident that occurred during their participation in the

¹⁷⁹ *Ibid*

¹⁸⁰ *Ibid*

¹⁸¹ “Report by Virgil Downing,” February 10, 1961. Series 2515: Mississippi State Sovereignty Commission Records, 1994-2006, Mississippi Department of Archives and History, February 24, 2016.

¹⁸² *Ibid*

Second World War. This unusual financial circumstance allowed him to operate independently from the white power structure's attempt at financial control. It is difficult to know exactly what happened as Posey and the rest of his company's service records were completely destroyed to keep the incident secret. Because of this unexpected form of compensation, Posey did not need to look for ways to provide income in the initial stages of his activism.¹⁸³ Many others were not as fortunate as Posey, and the financial struggles of activists on the grassroots are often forgotten. Having a source of income stripped away was crippling, and this often prevented continued involvement with the movement in both the white and the African American community. This is essentially what led to East's downfall.

After the Second World War, tension in Mississippi intensified once again. With an increasing mentality toward the importance of civil rights, people more openly questioned the racial rhetoric of politicians like Bilbo. At the same time, African Americans demanded the constitutional rights they had previously been denied. As the poll tax and literacy tests prevented blacks from exercising their right to vote, civil rights organizations started to devise plans to correct these persisting inequalities. The atmosphere across the South exploded even more dramatically after the landmark *Brown vs. Board of Education* decision in 1954. Florence Mars suggested that after the decision to desegregate schools in Neshoba County, "the relationship between whites and blacks was forever changed."¹⁸⁴

Accompanying this growing support for racial equality was an even stronger anti-civil rights sentiment. Immediately after the decision in 1954, the WCC was established

¹⁸³ Posey. Interview by Curtis J. Austin.

¹⁸⁴ Mars. Interview by Thomas James Healy.

throughout the South, and the organization embodied this growing sentiment. Attracting the “articulate, educated and upper class members of the populace,” the Council’s main goal was to maintain the practice of racial segregation.¹⁸⁵ In Mississippi, one of the pamphlets produced by the state’s specific chapter emphasized “the necessity for sensible organizations” to stop what they described as “highly organized and fanatical race mixers.”¹⁸⁶ Rather than depending on physical violence, the organization relied on economic and political power, and often achieved results through social pressure. In Neshoba County, the Council formed part of a triumvirate of segregationist organizations that continued to keep a close eye on Posey’s contribution to civil rights activism, as well as his interaction with other activists. Along with the WCC, this group included the secret spy agency of Mississippi, the Sovereignty Commission, and the extremely violent White Knights of the Ku Klux Klan.

Challenging the rhetoric of the WCC, Posey produced his own literature that explained the necessity for integration. Like East, writing was an important part of his activism. While there are few records about Posey’s participation in the Socialist Movement, one of the clearest indications of his affiliation can be found in the literature he produced for the *American Socialist* magazine. As early as 1956, Posey voiced his grievances with life in the segregated South in his writings for this New York based publication. Published by a group of individuals who split from the Socialist Workers Party (SWP) in 1953, this magazine was co-edited by George Clarke, Harry Braverman

¹⁸⁵ Watson. *Freedom Summer*, 192.

¹⁸⁶ Council Correspondence, 1964. M99, Citizens’ Council Collection. Box 1, Folder 2. McCain Library and Archives, The University of Southern Mississippi.

and Bert Cochran in an attempt to pursue a new model of Marxism.¹⁸⁷ Although Posey did not work as a journalist, writing politically oriented articles about socialism and civil rights provided him with an outlet to articulate his thoughts on segregation.

Immersing himself in this intellectual stream of thought provided Posey with a space to develop more radical ideas about race. At the same time, this allowed him to challenge white supremacy and racial inequality in an extremely public forum. As he openly participated in this political community, Posey made his affiliation with the Socialist Party very clear to the outside world, allowing him to be targeted by the opposition. Posey's first published article in 1956, "Cash and Carry Justice," demonstrated his frustration with *Brown's* limited impact in the South. While the court declared the state-sanctioned segregation of public schools as a violation of the Fourteenth Amendment, Posey emphasized continuing discrimination as the South continued to promote a separate and unequal model. African Americans were forced to pay to exercise their basic rights as American citizens; whether that be in cash, or in their life. Posey argued, "we are forced to pay in cash for our constitutional rights much in the same manner we buy our groceries at the supermarket."¹⁸⁸ He explained further:

Yet here in the South colored parents are being forced not only to spend their own money in order to see that the Court's ruling is enforced but are also being forced to risk the loss of their jobs and in many instances their very life itself. Surely something is amiss when the Constitution and Supreme Court guarantee a right and still citizens are being charged actual cash for same. Is this justice? I think not. Instead it is a useless and extravagant form of free enterprise individualism which hinders and in many cases completely blocks the legal exercise of human rights.¹⁸⁹

¹⁸⁷ Barry Sheppard, *The Party: Socialist Workers Party 1960-1988* (London: Resistance Books, 2012).

¹⁸⁸ Buford Posey, "Cash and Carry Justice," *American Socialist*, June, 1956, 23.

¹⁸⁹ *Ibid*, 23.

In raising questions about justice, his writing also highlighted the failure to implement the Supreme Court ruling in the South. For those who were unaware, Posey emphasized that the *Brown* decision did not necessarily mean the end of racial segregation.

Eight months later, Posey addressed race relations more explicitly in what is considered as his most controversial publication, “Where do we stand on Integration.”¹⁹⁰ In this article, he openly criticized American leaders and accused both Dwight D. Eisenhower and Adlai Stevenson of misleading “the average person into believing that if the Southern racists are only given time, the segregation problem will eventually be solved in a moderate, sane manner.”¹⁹¹ It is clear that Posey believed in direct action. Disillusioned with the government’s actions, he hoped to draw attention to the need for further intervention. As Posey called for the destruction of segregation as early as 1956, his ideology was radically different than the rest of the white community in Neshoba County. There is no surprise that his ideas did not receive a warm reception across the South. However, a couple of supportive responses appeared in the letters to the editor of later *American Socialist* publications. One response from Chicago titled “How to Further Fight?” positively stated, “This is the type of thing we need. Keep up the good work.”¹⁹²

Posey’s affiliation with the *American Socialist* magazine made him an easy target for those questioning his political orientation. Since the beginning of his participation in activism, Posey was labeled as a Communist. These accusations increased after writing his own articles as many Mississippians viewed socialism and communism as

¹⁹⁰ Buford Posey, “Where do we stand on Integration?” *American Socialist*, November, 1956, 12-15.

¹⁹¹ *Ibid*, 12.

¹⁹² M.N. “How to Further Fight?” *American Socialist*, January, 1957, 31.

synonymous ideologies. Anti-communist rhetoric was used throughout this whole period in an attempt to damage the reputation of those participating in the Civil Rights Movement.¹⁹³ Jason Sokol emphasizes the importance in viewing the characterization “communist” simply as a “flexible term for white southerners.”¹⁹⁴ This is linked to larger tensions in America at the time. As the anti-communist hysteria of the early Cold War intensified, many feared that the American way of life was in serious danger. Concerned about the potential rise of communism in the United States, government organizations and citizens launched an effort to expose communist activities. In the South, segregationists exploited this anxiety to discredit activists who fought for African American equality. In labeling the Civil Rights Movement as a “communist conspiracy” at both the local and the national level, segregationist groups like the WCC claimed to protect true American values. As they worked to investigate and monitor alleged communists, these organizations often presented civil rights and communism as inseparable.

As a result, most of the Sovereignty Commission reports that tracked Posey’s activity referred to him as a communist at some point. When writing to Percy Greene, the editor of the *Jackson Advocate*, Marvin K. Fischter discussed Posey in following manner:

¹⁹³ Related works include: Catherine Fosi, *Subversive Southerner: Anne Braden and the Struggle for Racial Justice in the Cold War South* (Lexington: University Press of Kentucky, 2002); Gilmore, *Defying Dixie*; Jennifer A. Delton, *Rethinking the 1950s: How Anticommunism and the Cold War Made America Liberal* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2013); Larry Ceplair, *Anti-Communism in the Twentieth Century: A Critical History* (Oxford: Praeger, 2011); Mary L. Dudziak, *Cold War Civil Rights: Race and the Image of American Democracy* (New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 2000); Robert Lieberman and Clarence Lang, *Anticommunism and the African American Freedom Movement: “Another Side of the Story”* (New York, Macmillan, 2009); Sokol, *There Goes My Everything*; Woods, *Black Struggle, Red Scare*, 68.

¹⁹⁴ Sokol, *There Goes My Everything*, 88. Jason Sokol talks in depth about how segregationists used anti-communist rhetoric to discredit the actions of civil rights workers. Other works that look at this in depth include:

“Mr. Posey, after making it known that he was a native Mississippian, talked much of his liberal attitude regarding Negroes and their rights as citizens, but after a few weeks he began to ask questions concerning the communist Party and its future as a political force in the United States.”¹⁹⁵ Posey never alluded to any form of connection to the communist party. Instead, he often emphasized his dedication to the Socialist Movement, and its ideologies. He was particularly attracted to socialism’s promise to achieve equality among members of society. Anti-communist rhetoric, nonetheless, was used to undermine Posey’s powerful voice.

The leader of Mississippi’s White Knights of the Ku Klux Klan, Samuel Bowers, maintained that “the Civil Rights Movement was the brainchild of a Communist and Jewish conspiracy operating out of Washington D.C.”¹⁹⁶ Many were already suspicious of white activists like Carl and Anne Braden, and Bowers warned specifically of “an army of black men being trained by Communists in Cuba who would return to the U.S and take over the county.”¹⁹⁷ This anti-communist sentiment was intensified by the publication of propaganda pamphlets by individuals claiming to fight against anti-American ideologies. One of these, Joseph P. Kamp, had been investigating the Communist conspiracy since 1919. In 1956, his pamphlet titled “Behind the plot to Sovietize the South” described Communism’s main objectives as “Black Supremacy,” “a Soviet South,” and ultimately “a Soviet America.”¹⁹⁸ In warning of invading forces that were determined to impose their philosophies on the people of the South, Kamp

¹⁹⁵ Letter to Percy Greene about Buford Posey, October 2, 1953. M191, Paul B. Johnson Papers. Box 142, Folder 13. McCain Library and Archives, The University of Southern Mississippi.

¹⁹⁶ Chet Bush, *Called to the Fire: A Witness for God in Mississippi; A Story of Dr. Charles Johnson* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 2013), 98.

¹⁹⁷ *Ibid*, 98.

¹⁹⁸ Behind the plot to Sovietize the South Pamphlet, 1956. M341, William D. Campbell Paper. Box 2, Folder 1. McCain Library and Archives, The University of Southern Mississippi.

encouraged white society to fear the Freedom Summer workers that would later arrive from the North.¹⁹⁹ For many Neshoba County residents, outsiders were not their only serious concern. Posey's commitment to activism demonstrated that members of their own community were equally as dangerous.

Posey had presented his own challenge against the white community when he supported Harry Truman as early as 1948. In the context of the anti-communist hysteria, it is clearer why Posey's support of Truman was viewed as such a betrayal by the rest of the white community. In December 1946, Truman issued Executive Order 9008 that created the President's Committee on Civil Rights to "conduct inquiries and to recommend civil rights programs."²⁰⁰ At the same time, Truman proposed a permanent Fair Employment Protection Commission, anti-lynching legislation, anti-poll tax laws, and measures to end discrimination in interstate transport facilities. Consequently, many considered Posey as supporting measures that were "communistic and unconstitutional"²⁰¹ The South's militant reaction demonstrated that "red and black fears had become a defining element of the region's ideology."²⁰²

Acting on the frustrations Posey voiced in the *American Socialist* about *Brown*, he agreed to support an African American student who planned to integrate the all-white University of Southern Mississippi (USM) in March of 1964.²⁰³ Years before, African American war veteran, Clyde Kennard, had attempted to enroll at the university three times when he was framed, imprisoned, and essentially murdered for a crime he did not

¹⁹⁹ *Ibid*

²⁰⁰ Charles J. Russo, *Encyclopedia of Education Law: Volume 1*. (Los Angeles: Sage Publications, 2008), 174.

²⁰¹ Woods, *Black Struggle, Red Scare*, 40.

²⁰² *Ibid*, 40.

²⁰³ "Fraizer's attempt to matriculate is unsuccessful." *Student Printz*, 20 March 1964, 1.

commit.²⁰⁴ Posey's friend, John Frazier, followed Kennard in 1963 when he attempted to integrate USM after Kennard's tragic death. In Mississippi at this time, black students wishing to enroll were required to submit a letter of recommendation from one of the university's previous alumni. For many African Americans, this was almost impossible, particularly as the university's student cohort had always been all white. Aiming to enroll in 1964 during the spring quarter registration, Frazier asked Posey, a previous graduate of USM, to provide the recommendation for his application. The twenty-two year old had developed a close relationship with Posey through his attendance at a local Universalist Unitarian church, and he admired him as a white Southerner who "dared to be different."²⁰⁵

On March 9, 1964, NAACP president, J.C. Fairley, accompanied Fraizer to register on campus. After the university administrators rejected his application, Fraizer was escorted off campus and told never to return. USM did not integrate successfully until the following year when Raylawni Branch and Elaine Armstrong were accepted in 1965. The university's longer history has been overlooked until very recently.²⁰⁶ Frazier's unfair treatment is often forgotten, and this is linked to the fact that those in power attempted to cover it up. On the same day Frazier's application was denied, the

²⁰⁴ For some of the first works to include Clyde Kennard's story see: Charles Payne, *I've Got the Light of Freedom: The Organizing Tradition and the Mississippi Freedom Struggle* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1995); Dittmer, *Local People*; Cagin and Dray, *We are Not Afraid*. More recent works include: Michael Newton, *Unsolved Civil Rights Murder Cases, 1934-1970* (Jefferson: McFarland & Company, 2016); Patricia Michelle Boyett, *Right to Revolt: The Crusade for Racial Justice in Mississippi's Central Piney Woods* (Jackson: University Press of Mississippi, 2015); Ownby, *The Civil Rights Movement in Mississippi*.

²⁰⁵ John Frazier. Interview by Nishani Frazier. 21 March 2004. Transcript. Center for Oral History and Cultural Heritage (COHCH). McCain Library and Archives, University of Southern Mississippi, Hattiesburg. Mississippi Digital Library, USM Libraries. Web. 24. March. 2016.

²⁰⁶ For the most detailed account of Fraizer's experience, see: Patricia Michelle Boyett, *Right to Revolt*, 94.

university's president William McCain ordered that original copies of the *Student Printz* newspaper reporting the incident were destroyed. At this time, "guards stopped students to snatch papers from their hands and interrupted classes to seize papers from students and professors."²⁰⁷ If Charles Kershner, one of the editing team, had not kept the original copy of the newspaper, this story of misconduct would have been forgotten entirely. Indeed, Posey was once again viewed as a troublemaker for his involvement. In one interview, Frazier discussed the violent consequences that led to the beating of Posey and his elderly father in a wheelchair.²⁰⁸ This incident was Posey's first experience of direct violence because of his participation in activism. Fraizer and other African Americans greatly appreciated Posey's support, particularly as one of the only members of the white community that held the "guts and courage to stand up to those in power."²⁰⁹ Despite this defeat by the white opposition, Posey's support of Frazier demonstrates his willingness to risk his life for racial equality in Mississippi.

In the years before Freedom Summer, Posey was also active in circles that included a number of widely known activists. According to one Sovereignty Commission report written by investigator Tom Scarborough, Posey worked closely with Bob Moses, who was part of the Southern Christian Leadership Conference (SCLC), the Student Non-Violent Coordinating Committee (SNCC) and the Council of Federated Organizations (COFO), Miles Horton, a former instructor at the Highlander Folk School in Tennessee and Robert L.T. Smith, an affiliate of Tougaloo College.²¹⁰ All of these men were

²⁰⁷ *Ibid*, 94.

²⁰⁸ Frazier. Interview by Nishani Frazier.

²⁰⁹ *Ibid*

²¹⁰ Report by Tom Scarborough, July 31, 1962. Series 2515: Mississippi State Sovereignty Commission Records, 1994-2006, Mississippi Department of Archives and History, January 20, 2016.

extremely well known throughout the activist community. The report went on to describe the following scene: “Higgs and Posey, along with a group of Negroes, while the Congressional election was going on in this district, joined hands and sang a song entitled, ‘Black and White Together, We Shall Win’.”²¹¹ Posey clearly recognized the importance of working alongside the African American community, even if segregation made it almost impossible. His participation in the Socialist Movement even allowed him to make connections with American labor and civil rights activist, A. Phillip Randolph, and James Farmer, one of the founders of the Congress of Racial Equality (CORE). This network of activists would be useful later when a higher level of protection from the KKK was necessary.

Developing an extensive network of support was crucial for Posey’s involvement in activism. In looking at his larger participation in civil rights activities, it is evident that he was part of a vast network of support, one that included both whites and African Americans throughout the South. When comparing Posey to East and Noonkester, he was arguably linked most closely to the African American community. One Sovereignty Commission report that tracked Posey’s movement investigated his association with a series of civil rights meetings that were organized by William Higgs, a Harvard Law graduate from Coahoma County, at Mt. Beulah. The report criticized these meetings and described them as existing “to brain-wash the Negro in how to eliminate his natural inferiority complex and fear, and to create a desire to reach their objectives, irrespective of whatever the consequences may be.”²¹² In reality, the leaders taught religion classes in the mornings and held mock elections in the afternoon to prepare for the ongoing voter

²¹¹ *Ibid*

²¹² *Ibid*

registration drive throughout the state. It is likely that these meetings were organized in preparation for the upcoming Freedom Summer event.

As the racial situation intensified, one of the most notable ways Posey effectively challenged southern society was in publically drawing attention to the persistent inequality within Mississippi. Florence Mars suggests that on the eve of Freedom Summer in 1964, “the legal resistance to integration had crumbled.”²¹³ As white society recognized segregation’s inevitable demise, groups like the Ku Klux Klan organized rapidly throughout the state.²¹⁴ For Mars, this process was evident as she noticed certain activities in Philadelphia: “these activities included checking out all out-of-county license plates, identifying every journalist and outsider and often harassing them, and generally policing the town.”²¹⁵ As Klansmen gathered frequently in local cafés, it was clear that the already intense environment in Neshoba County was on the verge of explosion. The Klan was even more willing to use violence against those who challenged the established hierarchy. This is demonstrated most clearly in the violent murders of the three Freedom Summer workers, James Chaney, Andrew Goodman, and Michael Schwerner on June 21, 1964. During this time, Philadelphia was one of the most talked about places in Mississippi, if not the entire United States.

Once again, Posey attracted the attention of national news media. Ralph Blumenfield, a *New York Post* journalist, placed Posey’s thoughts about the crime at the center of his article, “The Missing 3- A New Theory.”²¹⁶ Challenging the popular belief

²¹³ Mars. *Witness in Philadelphia*, 80.

²¹⁴ *Ibid*

²¹⁵ *Ibid*, 101.

²¹⁶ Ralph Blumenfield, “The Missing 3- A New Theory,” *New York Post*, Tuesday June 30, 1964,

that Chaney, Goodman, and Schwerner were released by the sheriff's office at 10.30 on Sunday evening, Posey proposed a new theory that they were actually "carried out and killed" sometime on Monday.²¹⁷ At first, Deputy Sheriff Price claimed to have spotted the speeding station wagon when he was watching for drag racers on the highway that Sunday afternoon. Posey's suspicions about the accuracy of the sheriff's statement were linked closely to his following point: "Around here, deputy sheriffs don't make arrests for traffic violations. It's either the highway patrol or a city policeman. And a Justice of the Peace court never has a hearing on Sunday. They're always on Monday morning."²¹⁸ According to Posey, a telephone call to Laurel G. Weir, the wife of the county jailer H.V.M. Herring, provided further evidence to support this theory. On the Monday morning, Posey called Ms. Weir and asked if she knew anything about the whereabouts of the three civil rights workers. Failing to give Posey the answers he wanted, she insisted that the men were still at the jail, and she asked him to check with her mother who was out there. Of course, Posey could not get in contact with her mother. When questioned at a later date, Ms. Weir conveniently denied having this conversation with Posey at all. At this point, Posey recognized that something was wrong, and he decided to do something about it.

Concerned that members of the Neshoba County community were withholding important information, he decided to speak out about the crime in a televised NBC interview on July 1, 1964. In a late night Huntley-Brinkley report, Posey provided useful information about the murders. In fact, he was one of the first people to turn attention to

²¹⁷ *Ibid*

²¹⁸ *Ibid*

the city's sheriff Lawrence Rainey as a major suspect.²¹⁹ In openly announcing his support for the Civil Rights Movement once again, Posey brought attention to something that one newspaper describes as “being thought of before, but never discussed openly by any white native of Neshoba County.”²²⁰ As Posey exposed the corruption within his local community, they responded with “hysterical anger.”²²¹ In doing so, he allowed himself to become a target of abuse by the various segregationist organizations that were active in the county. It is a miracle that Posey was not murdered after revealing information to the FBI. Nonetheless, he suffered significantly at the hands of those who promoted white supremacy. Posey's privilege as a white southerner did not always guarantee him complete protection. Instead, he was nearly sued, violently threatened by the Ku Klux Klan, and continuously labeled as a Communist agitator.

On July 18, 1964, the county jailer filed a one million dollar suit against the National Broadcasting Company (NBC), Richard Valeranni, Buford Posey, the Lamar Life Broadcasting Company and the Southern Television Corporation. This stated that the NBC interview carried out by Richard Valeranni at the home of Posey's father on Deemer Road was “libelous and slanderous of the sheriff.”²²² One article in the *Neshoba Democrat* suggested, “The broadcast and film went on to charge many other falsehoods... and all the statements were false and well known to be false by defendants.”²²³ As Tannehill continued to work as the editor of the *Neshoba Democrat*, the newspaper's accounts were likely to be extremely biased, particularly after his

²¹⁹ *Neshoba Democrat*, July 23, 1964.

²²⁰ Blumenfield, “The Missing 3,” 5.

²²¹ Mars, *Witness in Philadelphia*, 169.

²²² *Neshoba Democrat* July 23, 1964.

²²³ *Ibid*

previous feud with Posey. Although the suit was ultimately unsuccessful, this incident demonstrated the extreme lengths to which members of the Neshoba County community were willing to go to cover up the truth behind the Freedom Summer murders.

Throughout the turbulent time in the summer of 1964, Posey knew he was being watched even more closely. Blumenfield's article in the *New York Post* described him as "sitting on the porch with a 12-gauge bolt-action shotgun on his knees, and a snub-nosed 38 in his belt" on the day following the broadcast.²²⁴ Like many other civil rights activists, including East, Posey recognized the need to use weapons for protection. At this point, nonetheless, he was almost certain that the KKK were on their way to murder him. One of the Freedom Information Service records that traced his activity stated the following: "Buford Posey has been talking to the FBI, he has told them everything he knows... the Ku Klux Klan is extremely powerful. Sheriff is a member."²²⁵ As Posey accused Sheriff Rainey in an extremely public forum, he was essentially given a Klan death sentence. Although it was common knowledge that the sheriff was connected to the Klan, Posey took it one step further when he announced this information on public television. Historian Michael Newton suggests that shortly after making his accusation, "Posey found himself shadowed by deputy sheriffs in old pickup trucks and who lobbed bricks through his windows after nightfall."²²⁶

It is no surprise that violence towards Posey increased. During one incident, he was viciously attacked by a Klansman who pulled out a pistol, jabbed it into his stomach and then stated, "There are three of them out there and the snakes are eating them, and

²²⁴ Blumenfield, "The Missing 3," 5.

²²⁵ Freedom Information Service: WATS Reports, June 28, 1964. Micro 780, Reel 1. Wisconsin Historical Society Library, Madison.

²²⁶Newton, *The Ku Klux Klan in Mississippi*, 145.

you're going to be number four."²²⁷ Although Posey was able to talk his way out of the situation at the time, this demonstrates the extent that Klan members were willing to go in order to conceal certain information. In fact, Posey was extremely lucky. His extensive network of connections in the civil rights community allowed him to secure protection from higher up powers. Posey used his connection with SNCC leader James Forman to guarantee safety from President Lyndon B. Johnson's attorney, Nicolas Katzenbach. In his autobiographical book *The Wrong Side of Murder Creek*, another white activist Bob Zellner stated, "Forman cut to chase and asked the top law enforcement if he would personally guarantee the safety of Buford Posey, a white Mississippian who had given helpful information to the Justice Department concerning relatives who were potential suspects in the kidnappings and possible murder of the civil rights workers."²²⁸ Ultimate protection for Posey, nonetheless, came when he finally escaped to Tennessee. Despite his close run in with the Klan member at the Alabama gas station, Posey temporarily escaped the war that continued to be waged in Mississippi.

Posey's exploitation went beyond physical violence. As he challenged what it meant to be a white southerner in Neshoba County, a distorted image of Posey emerged. Immediately after the Freedom Summer murders, the Klan even accused Posey of committing the crime himself. Evidence of this accusation is found in a special Neshoba County fair issue of the Klan's newsletter, *The Klan Ledger*, produced in 1964 shortly after the event.²²⁹ Speculating about individuals involved in the murders, the author of the newsletter provided a list of suspects that included the "communists" who "never hesitate

²²⁷ Blumenfield, "The Missing 3," 5.

²²⁸ Zellner, *The Wrong Side of Murder Creek*, 251.

²²⁹ *Klan Ledger*, 1964. M356 Ben-Ami (Rabbi David Z.) Papers. Box 1, Folder 6. Special Collections, McCain Library and Archives, University of Southern Mississippi, Hattiesburg.

to murder one of their own if it will benefit the Party... Communism is pure, refined, scientific Cannibalism in action.”²³⁰ Linking Posey to the Communist Party once again, the report goes on to question his innocence when it states, “In this case, a known Communist by the name of Buford Posey was permitted to leave Philadelphia shortly after the disappearance of the other three. His part in the case has not been made clear at the time.”²³¹ Of course, the Klan alluded to the fact that he had something to do with the crime. In reality, Posey left as soon as an opportunity arose because the Klan had threatened to kill him.

In a 1965 article in the *Southern Patriot*, Posey responded to the wealth of accusations by explaining the incident in his own words. In this publication, Posey emphasized that leaving the state in an abrupt manner was necessary to escape the violence of the Mississippi White Knights who had sentenced him to death. It was not because he committed the murder. Posey stated, “I had committed no crime... but, in the eyes of my fellow white Mississippians, I’d done something far worse!”²³² In reality, the problem with Posey was his willingness to challenge the established order of white society. At the same time, it is important to recognize that the KKK was not the only organization that contributed to this particularly negative image of Posey. According to Posey, the government also played a part in damaging his credibility in the day after the NBC interview. He stated, “Governor Johnson of Mississippi, denounced me in a statewide TV broadcast as a lying Communist and stated that he had ordered my arrest by

²³⁰ *Ibid*

²³¹ *Ibid*

²³² *Southern Patriot*, February 1965.

the State Highway Patrol if I should ever return to Mississippi.”²³³ Despite his tumultuous relationship with the state, Posey did return to Mississippi where he passed away on October 6, 2015.

Posey’s work as an activist did not end the day he left Mississippi. In fact, he continued to work closely with civil rights organizations across the rest of the United States. In Tennessee, Posey joined forces with the Highlander Folk School, and he remained an ardent human rights activist for the rest of his life. Although many have defined his activism in relation to the controversy of the 1964 Freedom Murders, it is important to consider his larger legacy. Posey was engaged in forms of activism since a teenager, and his life demonstrates the potential for growing different ideologies in highly conservative environments. Through his rejection of racial segregation, he declared his position as an activist.

While Posey has since been considered as an “overzealous champion of questionable causes,” his public challenge to white supremacy demonstrated that he was willing to risk his own life to improve the system for others.²³⁴ Along with attracting national media attention, Posey declared publically to other Civil Rights activists, particularly in the African American community, that white society was not united. There was no “solid South,” so to speak. When looking at the diversity of public opinion in the Jim Crow South, Jason Sokol suggests, “Most white Southerners identified neither with the civil rights movement nor with its violent resisters. They were fearful, silent and often inert.”²³⁵ Posey was none of the above. In fact, his powerful and often vehement voice

²³³ *Ibid*

²³⁴ Mars. *Witness in Philadelphia*.

²³⁵ Sokol, *There Goes My Everything*, 4.

demonstrated that if people were willing to operate outside of the established power structure, segregation could be broken down from inside

CHAPTER IV – RALPH NOONKESTER: “THE WHOLE ROOF FELL IN.”

In February 1965, Dr. Ralph J. Noonkester coordinated a meeting with Rowan High School’s principal N.R. Burger in Hattiesburg, Mississippi. Noonkester, the president of William Carey College, had recently signed the Civil Rights Compliance Act with the U.S. Office of Education, making it the first college in Mississippi and the first Baptist college in the Deep South to voluntarily accept African Americans. Hoping for a straightforward and peaceful transition to integration, Noonkester contacted Burger at the all black high school to recommend a few outstanding students to enroll.²³⁶ Two of Rowan’s honors graduates, Vermester Jackson Bester and Linda Williams Cross, were selected as the deserving candidates. For Noonkester, both women’s courageous decision to attend William Carey would “pave the way for others to come.”²³⁷

The two prospective students and their parents were invited to attend the meeting with Noonkester and Burger as they “sat down and planned the integration of William Carey.”²³⁸ With the violent treatment of James Meredith at the University of Mississippi in recent memory, Bester’s mother Vermell Jackson was particularly concerned about her daughter’s safety at William Carey.²³⁹ Noonkester assured her that both girls were

²³⁶ Carol F. Karpinski, “*A Visible Company of Professionals: African Americans and the National Education Association During the Civil Rights Movement* (New York: Peter Lang, 2008), 96.

²³⁷ Ellen Ciurczak, “William Carey marks 50 years of integration,” *Hattiesburg American*, September 2, 2015. Accessed April 2, 2016: <http://www.hattiesburgamerican.com/story/news/education/2015/09/01/william-carey-fifty-years-integration/71545240/>

²³⁸ Richard Burger. Interview by Jason Sokeira. 08 November 2012. Transcript. Center for Oral History and Cultural Heritage (COHCH). McCain Library and Archives, University of Southern Mississippi, Hattiesburg. Mississippi Digital Library, USM Libraries. Web. 10. April. 2016.

²³⁹ Works that focus specifically on James Meredith’s integration at the University of Mississippi in 1962 include: Charles W. Eagles, *Price of Defiance: James Meredith and the Integration of Ole Miss* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2009); Frank Lambert, *The Battle of Ole Miss: Civil Rights v. States’ Rights* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2009); Henry T. Gallagher, *James Meredith and the Ole Miss Riot: A Soldier’s Story* (Jackson: University Press of Mississippi, 2012); James Meredith and William Doyle, *A Mission from God: A Memoir and Challenge for America* (New York: Atria Books,

guaranteed protection on campus at all times. For further peace of mind, the FBI provided the families with an emergency contact number if they experienced any trouble.²⁴⁰

Despite feelings of fear and anxiety, the integration of William Carey occurred smoothly in August later that year. When asked about her overall experience, Bester explained: “I had a few instances where I sat down, and people would get up and move. But for the most part, on campus, it was what Dr. Noonkester said, people were accepting.”²⁴¹

Noonkester’s careful planning and reassurance was crucial in the success of this somewhat perilous event. In working closely with the African American community in Hattiesburg, he demonstrated his willingness to join forces to implement revolutionary and lasting change for African American education in Mississippi.

Ralph Noonkester’s enduring influence on Hattiesburg’s educational system demonstrates further the need to broaden our understanding of civil rights activism. Although a white professor from Virginia seems an unlikely embodiment of the movement activist displayed in John Dittmer’s work, Noonkester fronted several decisions that brought dramatic social change to Mississippi.²⁴² Rather than leading demonstrations, participating in formal civil rights organizations like Buford Posey, or producing radical literature like P.D. East, Noonkester’s style of activism pushed for

2012); Karen Latchana Kenney, *James Meredith and the University of Mississippi* (Minneapolis: Abdo Publishing, 2016); Meredith Coleman McGee, *James Meredith: Warrior and the America that Created Him* (Santa Barbara: Praeger, 2013); William Doyle, *An American Insurrection: The Battle of Oxford, Mississippi, 1962* (New York: Doubleday, 2002).

²⁴⁰ Vermell Jackson and Vermester Bester. Interview by Ruth Poe. White. 18 October 2012. Transcript. Center for Oral History and Cultural Heritage (COHCH). McCain Library and Archives, University of Southern Mississippi, Hattiesburg. Mississippi Digital Library, USM Libraries. Web. 04. April. 2016.

²⁴¹ Dr. Ralph Noonkester. Interview by Garlinda Walls. 13 December 2006. Transcript. Center for Oral History and Cultural Heritage (COHCH). McCain Library and Archives, University of Southern Mississippi, Hattiesburg. Mississippi Digital Library, USM Libraries. Web. 06. December. 2015.

²⁴² John Dittmer. *Local People: The Struggle for Civil Rights in Mississippi* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1994).

small changes that benefited the everyday lives of others on the grassroots. At the same time, he was involved in several initiatives that contributed to the overturning of the Jim Crow system in Mississippi. In his unique and fluid position as both a southerner and an outsider, Noonkester successfully used his power in one of Hattiesburg's prominent organizations to leave a positive impact on society's race relations.

Adding to the diversity of the southern white experience, it is enlightening to explore three of Noonkester's major contributions to the movement in Hattiesburg. These include: signing the Compliance Pledge to desegregate William Carey college in 1965, leading an effort to rebuild the Vernon Dahmer home in 1966, and allowing his children to participate in the reverse integration of African American schools in the 1970s. This chapter considers the way that the rest of the community responded to Noonkester's actions, concluding with an assessment of his larger legacy in Mississippi.

Recognizing the full complexity behind some of Noonkester's decisions adds nuances to the existing story of desegregation. David Chappell makes a useful contribution in maintaining that the Civil Rights Movement should be viewed as "politics" instead of "moralistic melodrama."²⁴³ Noonkester's experience in the Hattiesburg Chamber of Commerce emphasizes the economic components of integration, rather than solely the political. Although Noonkester held a unique belief in promoting the moral necessity of desegregation, the majority of his colleagues encouraged change to avoid economic collapse.²⁴⁴ Fearing further economic boycotts organized by the African American community, Hattiesburg's business leaders agreed that the integration of

²⁴³ David L. Chappell, *Inside Agitators: White Southerners in the Civil Rights Movement*. (Baltimore: John Hopkins University Press, 1996), xvi.

²⁴⁴ Noonkester. Interview by Garlinda Walls.

schools and the rebuilding of the Dahmer home were crucial in maintaining peaceful relations among the larger community.

While Noonkester recognized that signing the 1965 Compliance Bill was morally right, he sold it as an “economic necessity” to convince the board’s more conservative individuals.²⁴⁵ As he used a particularly cautious way with words when addressing the rest of the Chamber of Commerce, Noonkester demonstrated his ability to appease proponents of segregation in the community. This was crucial in making important and effective change. At the same time, Noonkester developed a genuine and lasting relationship with the African American community as he forged links between groups that were once in conflict. Noonkester did not claim to be a pioneer in racial change, and his ties with some of the more conservative organizations certainly restricted his style of activism. Nonetheless, these circumstances do not minimize the risks he took and his valuable contribution to the breakdown of segregation in Hattiesburg. Although Noonkester was one of the only white men willing to steer the community in this direction, his story has been excluded from a narrative of activism that favors traditional forms of movement activity.²⁴⁶ While Ted Ownby and Patricia Boyett include a detailed discussion of Hattiesburg in their recent works on the Civil Rights Movement, both exclude Noonkester’s story entirely.

Recently, sociologists have been at the forefront of analyzing and explaining the types of collaborations that Noonkester worked towards during the Civil Rights

²⁴⁵ *Ibid*

²⁴⁶ Patricia Michelle Boyett, *Right to Revolt: The Crusade for Racial Justice in Mississippi’s Central Piney Woods* (Jackson: University Press of Mississippi, 2015); Ted Ownby, *The Civil Rights Movement in Mississippi* (Jackson: University Press of Mississippi, 2013). Both of these recent studies look closely at Hattiesburg but do not consider Noonkester’s place in their accounts.

Movement. In 2008, Maria Lowe used Belinda Robnett's concept of "bridge leading" as she investigates another white man's activism in Mississippi, Ernst Borinski.²⁴⁷ In Robnett's original work, *How Long, How Long: African American Women in the Struggle for Civil Rights*, the term was applied solely to black women. For Robnett, a "bridge leader" was a woman who helped connect ordinary people in local communities with formal civil rights organizations such as the Southern Christian Leadership Conference (SCLC) and the Congress of Racial Equality (CORE).²⁴⁸ As Lowe considered this understanding in her exploration of Tougaloo College sociology professor, Ernst Borinski, she was the first scholar to use Robnett's term in reference to a group other than black women. Lowe makes a strong case that Borinski was part of a small group of college professors exhibiting bridge-leading qualities. She states, "While most of their strategies were not as visible as those we have come to associate with the civil rights movement, these academic proponents of social change nonetheless worked very diligently, very quietly, and very consistently to bring about change in the extremely reactionary state climate."²⁴⁹ Through his opaque style of leadership, Borinski, she

²⁴⁷ Belinda Robnett, *How Long, How Long: African American Women in the Struggle for Civil Rights* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1997). Some other works that incorporate Robnett's concept of "bridge-leading" include: Barbara Ransby, *Ella Baker and the Black Freedom Movement: A Radical Democratic Vision* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2003); Bettye Collier-Thomas and V.P. Franklin, *Sisters in the Struggle: African American Women in the Civil Rights- Black Power Movement* (New York: New York University Press, 2001); Dayo F. Gore, *Radicalism at the Crossroads: African American Women Activists in the Cold War* (New York: New York University Press, 2011); Faith S. Holsaert, Martha Prescod Norman M. Zellner, eds., *Hand on the Freedom Plow: Personal Accounts by Women in SNCC* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 2010); Maria R. Lowe, "An Unseen Hand: The Role of Sociology Professor Ernst Borinski in Mississippi's Struggle for Racial Integration in the 1950s and 1960s." *Leadership* 4.1 (2008): 1.

²⁴⁸ Robnett, *How Long, How Long*.

²⁴⁹ Maria R. Lowe and Morris, J. Clint, "Civil Rights Advocates in the Academy: White Pro-Integrationist Faculty at Millsaps College." *Journal of Mississippi History* 69. (2007): 126.

argues, “built bridges between blacks and whites, academics and activists.”²⁵⁰ For this reason, his participation in activism deserves greater recognition.

After considering Robnett and Lowe’s work in light of Noonkester’s contributions, it is perhaps fitting to imagine him as Hattiesburg’s own “bridge leader.” Noonkester utilized his connections within the Chamber of Commerce, and he often provided a useful link between Hattiesburg’s African American and white communities. In his meeting with N.R. Burger in 1965, Noonkester demonstrated his willingness to include others in forms of decision-making that were once dominated by prominent members of white society.

James Ralph Noonkester was born to Reggie Lee and Arcie C. Parks Noonkester on June 10, 1924, in Flatridge, Virginia.²⁵¹ After graduating from Oak Hill Academy, Noonkester attended Marion College in Marion, Virginia. In 1944, he received his Bachelor of Arts degree in English and Sociology from the University of Richmond. Interested in higher education, Noonkester went on to complete his Th.M. and Ph.D. degrees at The Southern Baptist Theological Seminary in Louisville, Kentucky. In 1952, Noonkester decided to leave his home in Charlottesville, Virginia, with his wife Naomi Hopkins Noonkester. With the intention of beginning careers in college administration, both were attracted to the developing city of Hattiesburg. Originally, the couple planned “to stay only a couple of years and then return to Noonkester’s much-loved home in Virginia.”²⁵² As Naomi secured a long-term job as registrar at the old Mississippi

²⁵⁰ Lowe, “An Unseen Hand”: 1.

²⁵¹ Ralph Noonkester Obituary. October 2, 2012. Accessed April 18, 2015: <http://www.legacy.com/obituaries/hattiesburgamerican/obituary.aspx?pid=160223921>.

²⁵² Donna Duck Wheeler, *William Carey College: The First 100 years* (Charleston: Arcadia Publishing, 2006), 59.

Women's College, William Carey's predecessor, Noonkester was offered positions as Professor of Religion and as the college's Dean.²⁵³ Four years later, Noonkester was chosen as president and in 1956, he was the nation's youngest college president at thirty-two years old.

Upon Noonkester's arrival, Hattiesburg entered a period of dramatic change. In the years after the Second World War, the city experienced considerable growth economically, intellectually, and socially. With the founding of Forrest General Hospital in 1952, people were attracted to the city and moved closer to what was then Mississippi Southern College.²⁵⁴ As this institution became the University of Southern Mississippi in 1962, Mississippi's Women's College went co-educational and changed its name to William Carey College under Noonkester's leadership. Despite promising change in Hattiesburg, the city continued to be gripped firmly by the system of racial inequality that dominated life in the South. As segregation remained almost untouched, "like most other southern cities with predominantly white governments," Hattiesburg "saw no immediate reason to change a way of life that it had harbored since its very inception."²⁵⁵

In response to severe and persisting racial discrimination, Hattiesburg was also home to a large network of civil rights organizers. Dittmer suggests that as Hattiesburg blacks were more economically stable than those in the Delta, "white resistance to black advancement was more subtle."²⁵⁶ As demonstrated in P.D. East's story, segregationists in this area favored methods of economic intimidation. Despite endless threats from the

²⁵³ *Ibid*

²⁵⁴ Benjamin Morris, *Hattiesburg Mississippi: A History of the Hub City* (Charleston: The History Press, 2014).

²⁵⁵ *Ibid*, 164.

²⁵⁶ Dittmer, *Local People*, 179.

white opposition, activists continued to organize. According to Dittmer, the Hattiesburg Civil Rights Movement was officially born in 1962 when Reverent L.P. Ponder opened St. John's Methodist Church in Palmer's Crossing, a small settlement just outside of the city.²⁵⁷ At one of the church's first meetings, a group of locals agreed to take the notoriously difficult voter registration test at the courthouse in Hattiesburg. One of these individuals, Victoria Gray Adams, eventually served as a founding member of the Mississippi Freedom Democratic Party (MFDP).

During the Freedom Summer event in 1964, the city served as one of the major headquarters for civil rights action, particularly in the form of voter registration efforts. Moreover, Hattiesburg was the center of activity for the MFDP, a political party that challenged the all-white Mississippi Democratic Party in the 1964 National Convention. As a native Virginian, Noonkester was all too familiar with a system of racial inequality, but the environment in Mississippi was also unique. While racial tensions existed throughout the South, Mississippi was viewed as one of the most violent places in the United States at this time. Described by Bruce Watson as "a symbol of racial terror," the state's environment was likened to a "war-zone" by many of the northern volunteers who participated in Freedom Summer.²⁵⁸

Despite Noonkester's status as an outsider, he integrated himself fully into the larger Hattiesburg community. He suggested, "I was initiated as best I suppose an outsider could be in community activities."²⁵⁹ According to the Chamber of Commerce's membership records, Noonkester joined the Hattiesburg organization in 1958, six years

²⁵⁷ *Ibid*, 181.

²⁵⁸ Bruce Watson, *Freedom Summer: The Savage Season of 1964 That Made Mississippi Burn and Made America a Democracy*. (New York, Penguin: 2011), 9.

²⁵⁹ Noonkester. Interview by Garlinda Walls.

after his arrival to the city.²⁶⁰ This particular group existed as a network to further the interests of businesses in the local area, representing and promoting its members to the larger community. One document that details the organization's history stated, "Hattiesburg's Chamber of Commerce was organized as the Commercial Club in 1905 and has been in continuous existence since... If you will look over the roster of the past presidents of the Chamber of Commerce you will find it includes most of the outstanding business leaders of Hattiesburg."²⁶¹

Following Hattiesburg's economic boom after the Second World War, business leaders were careful to prevent activity that may have hindered the city's economic improvement. As civil rights activists threatened to boycott Hattiesburg's businesses, leaders of the Chamber worked to appease them. The minutes from a 1965 meeting demonstrate anxieties immediately after Freedom Summer and the passing of the 1965 Civil Rights Act. The document, "Mississippi Economic Council Statement on Civil Rights Act," stated:

As concerned Mississippians aware of the monumental problems facing our state, we advance with pride the fact that Mississippi is not an island unto itself but is an integral and responsible part of the United States. We recognize that the Civil Rights Act of 1964 has been enacted by the Congress as law. It cannot be ignored and should not be unlawfully defied. Resistance to the law should be through established procedures in the American tradition of resort to enlightened public opinion, the ballot boxes, and the courts. We should adjust ourselves to the impact of this legislation regardless of personal feelings and convictions and limit our resistance to the stated methods.... Mississippians have the capacity and courage to face the problems of this state and to create conditions favorable to their

²⁶⁰ Member Records, 1958-1978. M479, Hattiesburg Chamber of Commerce Collections. Box 7, Folder 2. McCain Library and Archives, University of Southern Mississippi, Hattiesburg.

²⁶¹ Hattiesburg Chamber of Commerce: History and Work, undated. M316, Tatum Family Business Records. Box 171, Folder 5. McCain Library and Archives, University of Southern Mississippi, Hattiesburg.

solution. We call upon all Mississippians to take positive action towards these ends.²⁶²

In this time of great uncertainty, many of the community's prominent business leaders recognized the need for strong leadership. J.D. Lewis, another member of the organization and a distinguished Hattiesburg businessman approached Noonkester with a plan of action in 1965.²⁶³ Lewis was known throughout the city as "a very strong political leader," owning the three organizations that supplied Hattiesburg and Forrest County with electricity: Hattiesburg Brick Works, Pittman Concrete Company, and Southeastern Materials Company. Describing Lewis, Mike Miller suggested "the fact that he is represented on the Mississippi Power Board would indicate that his economic influence ranges considerably beyond the confines of Hattiesburg and Forrest County. I would suppose Lewis to be an actual or potential prime factor in the way things are run in Hattiesburg and Forrest County."²⁶⁴

Lewis was also influential in deciding what individuals fronted the Chamber of Commerce.²⁶⁵ Concerned about racial tensions, he eventually chose Noonkester and Rowland "Rody" W. Heidelberg who represented an old established family in Hattiesburg, to serve as upcoming presidents. Lewis trusted these men with important decision-making that he suspected would follow. In 1965, Heidelberg served as the Chamber's president and Noonkester filled the position the year after. Noonkester later claimed that in this role, he found himself in a "very strategic position at the time that the

²⁶² Mississippi Economic Council Statement on Civil Rights Act, M479, Hattiesburg Chamber of Commerce Collections. Box 4, Folder 1. McCain Library and Archives, University of Southern Mississippi, Hattiesburg.

²⁶³ Noonkester. Interview by Garlinda Walls.

²⁶⁴ Mike Miller, "The Power Structure in Hattiesburg," undated. Mississippi State Sovereignty Commission Records, 1994-2006, Mississippi Department of Archives and History, January 20, 2016.

²⁶⁵ Noonkester. Interview by Garlinda Walls.

move towards integration was taking place in the business community as well as in the educational community.”²⁶⁶ Nonetheless, his position in this organization was extremely important in pursuing his role as a community “bridge leader.” As well as securing his financial stability, his role as president acquainted him with community members who helped Noonkester to be a driving force behind change. This support was particularly important as he received forceful push back from Mississippi’s Baptist community when signing the Compliance Pledge in February 1965. Although Noonkester was also affiliated with the Baptist Church, his alternative way of thinking threatened members of the religious community throughout the state.

The atmosphere only intensified further. Although Noonkester was unaware at the time, his work in Hattiesburg was far from finished. As the racial situation escalated in the early months of 1966, it appeared that the whole roof had fallen in. On January 10 that same year, the White Knights of the Ku Klux Klan violently murdered local civil rights activist Vernon Dahmer. Dahmer was born into Hattiesburg’s Kelly Settlement, the historically wealthier African American community known for their lighter complexion. Across Hattiesburg, he was an extremely loved member of the local community and even sent groceries to another local activist, Raylawni Branch, the day he was killed.²⁶⁷ Since the early 1960s, Dahmer had encouraged local blacks to register to vote, despite the successful methods of prevention.

To halt his successful form of activism, the leader of the militant KKK organization, Samuel Bowers, sent a group of Klansmen to throw flaming jugs of

²⁶⁶ *Ibid*

²⁶⁷ Raylawni Branch. Interview by Kim Adams. 25 October 1993. Transcript. Center for Oral History and Cultural Heritage (COHCH). McCain Library and Archives, University of Southern Mississippi, Hattiesburg. Mississippi Digital Library, USM Libraries. Web. 24. April. 2016.

gasoline into the Dahmer's home in rural Hattiesburg.²⁶⁸ In retaliation, Dahmer grabbed his gun and held the attackers at bay so his wife and ten year old daughter Bettie had an opportunity to escape. Unfortunately, the incident left Dahmer's lungs severely burned, and he died in the local hospital the next afternoon from smoke inhalation.²⁶⁹ His wife, Ellie, explained the event in her own words: "... in the morning, well when I waked up, I heard shooting and blazes; it looked like the house was on fire. I thought it was the cotton picker...I jumped up and said, Vernon, I believe they got us this time. By that time you could hear gunshots coming in the house."²⁷⁰ Because Dahmer was very active in the NAACP and participated in voter registration efforts, segregationists saw him as a serious threat to the established social order. For the Klan, the best way to solve the problem was to physically remove the threat through methods of assassination. Dittmer suggests, "The Ku Klux Klan's response to the Voting Rights Act had been to step up its reign of terror."²⁷¹ Dahmer's murder in Hattiesburg was certainly part of this violent effort.

News of Dahmer's death sent ripples throughout the community. A couple of weeks after the tragic event, Noonkester attended a meeting with city and county officials, and the Forrest County Branch of the NAACP. One of the reports from a meeting on January 28, 1966, explained:

Dr. Noonkester, in a short and sincere statement told the visitors that the Hattiesburg Chamber of Commerce was composed of the business and professional men and women of the community who are all most anxious to maintain good relationships with all citizens, to live in a peaceful and orderly community under the laws that now exist, and wish to maintain a peaceful and

²⁶⁸ Ellie Dahmer. Interview by Orley B. Caudill. 02 July 1974. Transcript. Center for Oral History and Cultural Heritage (COHCH). McCain Library and Archives, University of Southern Mississippi, Hattiesburg. Mississippi Digital Library, USM Libraries. Web. 04. April. 2016.

²⁶⁹ Ownby, *The Civil Rights Movement in Mississippi*, 210.

²⁷⁰ Dahmer. Interview by Orley B. Caudill.

²⁷¹ Dittmer. *Local People*, 391.

harmonious relationship between all the citizens of the city and county. He told them that the Chamber of Commerce could not force its members to any course of action, but the Chamber, through its Board of Directors, had twice taken a firm position on these matters which is a matter of record in the public press; and he assured them that it was the desire of the entire Chamber of Commerce to maintain and improve the relationships that have existed between the races here for many years.²⁷²

There is no doubt that the Chamber's interest in improving relations between the races was economically motivated. Rather than caring solely about the black community's concerns, men like Lewis feared that anger among activists would disrupt the success of Hattiesburg's businesses. Their main goal, therefore, was to prevent the city from shutting down economically. Despite this reality, Noonkester was required to forge links between the white and the African American community on a very personal level.

Although the NAACP had also offered to help fund the rebuilding effort, Ellie Dahmer wanted to leave the project in the all-white Chamber of Commerce's hands.²⁷³

Immediately after the murder in January, Virginia Woodward, a reporter from the *Hattiesburg American* newspaper, approached Noonkester to organize publicity efforts.

Soon after, Woodward and the photographer Robert Miller took Noonkester to investigate the location where the house previously stood. Here Miller captured photographs of Noonkester that were used to publicize the efforts to pay for the rebuilding of the Dahmer home.²⁷⁴

²⁷² Report on the Forrest County Branch of the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People, January 28, 1966. M479, Hattiesburg Chamber of Commerce Collections. Box 4, Folder 1. McCain Library and Archives, University of Southern Mississippi, Hattiesburg.

²⁷³ Dahmer. Interview by Orley B. Caudill.

²⁷⁴ Noonkester. Interview by Garlinda Walls.

One month later, the Chamber's board members discussed specific plans for the rebuilding effort in a meeting held on February 10, 1966.²⁷⁵ Minutes from this meeting explained that the Mayor had chosen Noonkester to serve as the Chairman of the project to rebuild what the fire had previously destroyed. Moreover, this document stated that a local architect had volunteered his services to provide the building plans at no cost. At this point, there was already \$2500 available in cash to use towards replacing the structure.²⁷⁶ J.D. Lewis himself owned building materials and companies, and he offered significant support in terms of money and materials. Masonite Corporation, Alexander Materials, and Frierson Building Materials were among the other organizations that donated.

At the same time, various individuals in the local community offered active support to the project, including volunteers from the University of Southern Mississippi.²⁷⁷ Although a number of the whites involved continued to practice segregation, they openly condemned the violent actions of the KKK. Many members of the community wanted to denounce the activities of the Klan, very much in the same way that the White Citizens' Council had previously done. Patricia Boyett suggests, "It was the first time in Mississippi that so many white citizens condemned a lynching and demanded an investigation."²⁷⁸ Before this, the violent actions against African Americans were often ignored.

²⁷⁵ Minutes of the Hattiesburg Chamber of Commerce Board of Directors, February 10, 1966. "Report on the Forrest County Branch of the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People," January 28, 1966. M479, Hattiesburg Chamber of Commerce Collections. Box 4, Folder 2. McCain Library and Archives, University of Southern Mississippi, Hattiesburg.

²⁷⁶ *Ibid*

²⁷⁷ *Ibid*

²⁷⁸ Boyett, *Right to Revolt*, 32.

After Dahmer's death, feelings of anger emerged among the African American communities in Hattiesburg. Many wanted revenge for what had happened to one of the most celebrated local activists. While these feelings were not resolved immediately, Noonkester played an important role in leading an effort toward reconciliation. During his time as head of the rebuilding project, Noonkester developed a particularly close friendship with Vernon Dahmer's wife, Ellie. Later in life, Noonkester continued to regularly visit the Dahmer family at their home in Hattiesburg.²⁷⁹

Noonkester's close relationship with the African American community is an important component of his position as a "bridge leader." One of Hattiesburg's local civil rights activists, Daisy Wade Harris, remembered Noonkester forming part of a biracial committee in 1965. She explained: "it wasn't a thing that was known. It was just they could meet."²⁸⁰ With attendees such as the president of the Forrest County NAACP, J.C. Fairley, and Hattiesburg's civil rights activist, Jeanette Smith, Noonkester developed close relationships with key black leadership figures in the community. During his time serving on the committee, Noonkester played a part smoothing out some of the problems, particularly as he represented both viewpoints. When discussing the board meetings, he stated, "I was the white but I was also almost considered the third black member."²⁸¹ Because of his significant contributions, other members of the community recognized Noonkester's willingness to the fight for African American equality. When describing

²⁷⁹ Noonkester. Interview by Garlinda Walls.

²⁸⁰ Daisy Harris Wade. Interview by Dick Conville. 12 July 2001. Transcript. Center for Oral History and Cultural Heritage (COHCH). McCain Library and Archives, University of Southern Mississippi, Hattiesburg. Mississippi Digital Library, USM Libraries. Web. 08. April. 2016.

²⁸¹ Noonkester. Interview by Garlinda Walls.

him, N.R. Burger's son, Richard Burger suggested: "You had to know Dr. Noonkester. You'd probably saw a small framed built but plenty of energy. He was a great man."²⁸²

Noonkester's contribution to the breakdown of segregation transcended his activities in the 1960s. While P.D. East and Buford Posey's experiences extend the timeline of the movement to an earlier period in the 1950s, Noonkester's story highlights the value in looking further into the 1970s. As these years are sometimes neglected, Noonkester's work toward the desegregation of Hattiesburg's public schools reasserts their significance in the civil rights narrative. Once again, Noonkester's unusual actions demonstrated his willingness to overturn the city's white power structure.

White Mississippians continued to resist the desegregation of schools in the local area, and they often used private and state sanctioned economic and physical intimidation. Charles Bolton suggests, "for White Mississippians, one-race schools represented the very heart of segregation. Losing the battle to preserve segregated schools would make it impossible to prevent social equality and miscegenation and was tantamount to losing the war over the continuation of racial separation."²⁸³ Despite *Brown vs. Board's* passing in 1954, progress was "slow and fitful" as Hattiesburg offered a freedom of choice system for students.²⁸⁴ While freedom of choice sounded promising, in reality it continued to reinforce the prominence of segregation. The city, nonetheless, faced the inevitable integration of schools when Noonkester's children Myron and Lila were still young.

²⁸² Richard Burger. Interview by Jason Sokeira. 08 November 2012. Transcript. Center for Oral History and Cultural Heritage (COHCH). McCain Library and Archives, University of Southern Mississippi, Hattiesburg. Mississippi Digital Library, USM Libraries. Web. 10. April. 2016.

²⁸³ Charles C. Bolton, *The Hardest Deal of All: The Battle over School Integration in Mississippi 1870-1980* (Jackson: University Press of Mississippi, 2005), xvii.

²⁸⁴ Morris, *Hattiesburg Mississippi*, 188.

As his son Myron entered the eighth grade and his daughter Lila entered the fifth grade, a new “Zoning Plan” for integrating schools was adopted in 1971.²⁸⁵ This was essentially a half measure, as it existed solely to preserve white neighborhoods by assigning students primarily on their location. White flight ensured that only a fraction of whites assigned to the black schools would enroll, but Noonkester decided to change this pattern. As Noonkester lived in the William Carey president’s home on the south east of town, his children were assigned to all black schools. Many white neighbors in a similar position opted either to send their children to a private school, or to pay a fee to attend public schools farther out in Forrest County. As others avoided integration, Noonkester decided to base his decision on his children’s desires. Although a number of wealthy Baptists offered to fund his children’s education in private academies in New England and Virginia, Myron and Lila declined these offers to remain at their home in Hattiesburg.²⁸⁶

The traditional narrative of desegregation, as told in James T. Patterson’s *Brown v. Board of Education: A Civil Rights Milestone and its Troubled Legacy*, often focuses on African American children entering all white schools.²⁸⁷ The experiences of white children who attended all black schools are rarely considered, and these require further investigation. Myron and Lila’s experiences provide a unique insight. In 1970, Myron joined the Lillie Burney Junior High School, and Lila joined the Mary Bethune

²⁸⁵ Dorothy Bell Lucas, *Memories: Royal Street: L-J. Rowan, A Cultural Legacy 1950-1970* (Bloomington: Author House, 2011), 6.

²⁸⁶ Noonkester. Interview by Garlinda Walls.

²⁸⁷ James T. Patterson, *Brown v. Board of Education: A Civil Rights Milestone and Its Troubled Legacy* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2001).

Elementary School in Hattiesburg. Noonkester's children took completely unique paths when compared to their peers.

Despite the zoning plan's aim for around 100 white students to attend Lillie Burney, Myron was the only white student in his grade by midyear. Noonkester recalled his son writing an article for the scholastic magazine that gained a national award. In this, Myron relived some of his own experiences of integration, providing a useful insight from the white perspective. He discussed how African American children at the school wanted to touch his skin, as they "had never touched the flesh of a white boy."²⁸⁸ Many of his classmates admired his decision, remembering him as "the one who had stood his ground."²⁸⁹ The year after Myron made this bold step, many other children followed and the push toward fully integrated schools in Hattiesburg seemed as if it were progressing.

Unsurprisingly, many others in the white community criticized Noonkester's decision, claiming that the experience would negatively affect his children. Many argued that he was going too far and was even sacrificing his children's academic education to prove a point. Myron's experience, nonetheless, was extremely positive. He eventually became a scholar at Duke University, spending time at the University of Oxford in England, and finally receiving his Ph.D. in British history at the University of Chicago. Noonkester's daughter Lila was also very successful. Her experience was slightly different as there were already five other white children at Lillie Burney when she first attended. In the end, Lila graduated with honors and went on to receive a scholarship to Eastman School of Music in Rochester, New York. In 2013, Myron was honored at a service held by the Forrest County Branch of the NAACP for "breaking barriers as

²⁸⁸ Noonkester. Interview by Garlinda Walls.

²⁸⁹ *Ibid*

minority students in Hattiesburg's desegregation effort of the 1960s and 1970s."²⁹⁰ This ceremony also included Ronnie Breazeale, one of the six white students to integrate Rowan High School in 1970.

Noonkester's activities were not unnoticed by the various organizations that worked to maintain segregation in Mississippi. His experience as a southern white activist sheds further light on the ways that the white opposition responded to threats. On one afternoon, the Noonkester family looked down from the second story of the president's home to see a group of the Ku Klux Klan burning a cross on their front lawn.²⁹¹ Samuel Bowers, the leader of the White Knights faction, criticized the White Citizens' Council for using tame methods. As a result, Bowers and the White Knights adopted four specific tactics attracting "publicity through cross burnings and leafleting, burning and dynamiting, flogging, and extermination."²⁹² In using one of their common methods of intimidation, the Klan simply intended to threaten Noonkester and his family with the cross burning. Noonkester claimed the Klan did this because "they thought that by putting that much fear in us, that we were going to back off from any leadership in the integration of the area."²⁹³ In one interview, Noonkester described the intense feelings of fear that followed the event:

You can talk about being scared to death, I suppose, some would think that we were more scared to death when we took our children into these predominantly black schools, or when the two people came and integrated William Carey College, becoming the very first two African Americans who were ever enrolled at our school. That wasn't the place when we were most scared, we were scared out of our wits when we looked down and saw those KKK folk.²⁹⁴

²⁹⁰ Ed Kemp, "Men offer different integration view," *Hattiesburg American* January 17, 2013.

²⁹¹ Noonkester. Interview by Garlinda Walls.

²⁹² Watson, *Freedom Summer*, 277.

²⁹³ Noonkester. Interview by Garlinda Walls.

²⁹⁴ *Ibid*

Despite this overwhelming sense of fear, Noonkester did not back down and instead continued his work in the Hattiesburg community. Similarly to East, his willingness to risk his livelihood and the lives of his family situates him firmly in the definition of a civil rights activist.

After the Klan attack, Noonkester received a series of hate letters. When counting, he claimed to have fifty letters from different members of the community, including individuals representing Mississippi College and others from local churches. One of the letters from a prominent Baptist woman out of Jackson read, “I see by your name Noonkester that you’re certainly not a native Mississippian and for that we are very pleased.”²⁹⁵ Many characterized Noonkester as an interfering outsider, criticizing him for meddling in Mississippi’s politics when he was not welcome. Discussing Noonkester’s effort to rebuild the Dahmer home, another letter stated: “Let it be understood that I do not approve of what happened, but I disapprove of selecting certain cases in this instance for publicity... if this family were destitute, I would be one of the first to contribute some kind of aid. But they are far better off than any family. I don’t approve of coddling them for publicity purposes. Why don’t you wake up to the fact that you are doing the

²⁹⁵ Noonkester. Interview by Garlinda Walls. This information has been gathered from Noonkester reading the letters out loud in an interview. In the interview, Noonkester suggested that he made arrangements with the University of Southern Mississippi and William Carey to have these particular sources (hate letters) and his own memoir available to researchers as part of a collection. However, I have been unable to locate the actual sources as both USM and William Carey. After speaking in more detail to an archivist at William Carey, they claimed to know nothing about the whereabouts of the sources. They also claimed to hold no presidential papers for Noonkester, despite him serving the institution for thirty-three years. I have even made contact with Noonkester’s son, Myron, who agreed to let me view the files privately. However, after getting in contact to arrange a date, I received no response. I am still working to locate these sources and have been informed that Bobs Tusa may have further information. At this point, I have been unable to gather any contact information for Tusa.

Hattiesburg area an injustice.”²⁹⁶ As one of the more successful African American families in Hattiesburg, many whites frowned upon the Chamber of Commerce offering financial support after Vernon Dahmer’s death.

Despite limited support in the white community, Noonkester and his family continued to make decisions that contributed toward the gradual breakdown of segregation in Mississippi. After retiring from his position at William Carey College, Noonkester admitted that he “jumped out of the frying pan and into the fire” once he “became a member of the local school board here.”²⁹⁷ Once again, this allowed him to maintain his role as one of the community’s “bridge leaders.” Overall, Noonkester participated in a very subtle form of activism. He did not preach any sermons about integration, nor did he force his religious views as a practicing Baptist on anyone. Noonkester did not become an “active alarmist” like Buford Posey, and he instead avoided media attention at all costs.²⁹⁸ In a later interview, Noonkester stated he was “simply a member of a community who tried to make the required decisions of leadership in the community at the time.”²⁹⁹ At the same time, it is necessary to consider the ways his position in a reasonably powerful organization affected his contribution. Unlike P.D. East or Buford Posey, Noonkester was not a victim of severe economic intimidation. Like Ernst Borinski at Tougaloo College and other faculty across Mississippi, a “college setting provided them with job security and an umbrella of protection that others in Mississippi did not have.”³⁰⁰ So, while Noonkester’s standing in a position of power was

²⁹⁶ *Ibid*

²⁹⁷ *Ibid*

²⁹⁸ *Ibid*

²⁹⁹ *Ibid*

³⁰⁰ Lowe and Morris, “Civil Rights Advocates in the Academy”: 126.

often restricting, it also offered a sense of protection that was unavailable to other activists.

Ralph Noonkester had a lasting impact on William Carey University, the city of Hattiesburg, and the state of Mississippi more broadly. Serving as the president of William Carey for 33 years, and the Dean for 4 years, he served the institution for 37 years. Until his death in 2012, Noonkester remained active, working as an adjunct professor teaching the New Testament while serving as president emeritus of the university. One recent article suggested, “Dr. Noonkester took what was considered a big challenge, revitalizing a school that many thought would be shut down, and transformed it into a modern, viable institution.”³⁰¹ By voluntarily signing the Compliance Pledge in 1965, Noonkester offered a pioneering commitment towards desegregation in Forrest County. Rather than avoiding confrontation, Noonkester decided to stand up against segregation.

Ultimately, Noonkester’s service transcends his contribution to the transformation of William Carey. Working as a “bridge leader” allowed him to forge links between Hattiesburg’s white and black community, and this undermined the system of segregation in the region. Men like Noonkester demonstrated that, “white allegiance to the system was divided and full of weak spots.”³⁰² Looking in detail at his story extends our understanding of the ways particular white southerners engaged in activism, how their activism was limited, and how others in the white community responded. Investigating his experience provides an insightful lens into the Hattiesburg Chamber of Commerce,

³⁰¹ Joshua Wilson, “Former President Noonkester leaves behind vast legacy,” *The Cobbler*, November 2, 2012, 2.

³⁰² David L. Chappell, *Inside Agitators: White Southerners in the Civil Rights Movement*. (Baltimore: John Hopkins University Press, 1996), 4.

alliances that were formed within the community, and the varied responses to the death of Vernon Dahmer. A recent historian of Hattiesburg argues there are “a host of driven individuals who have devoted their lives to their city and community, irrespective of the costs and regardless of the risks.”³⁰³ Ralph Noonkester is one of these individuals, and his story deserves a place in the history of the fight for racial equality in Mississippi.

³⁰³ Morris, *Hattiesburg Mississippi*, 223.

CHAPTER V - CONCLUSION

In 1956, P.D. East visited William Faulkner at his Rowan Oak home in Oxford, Mississippi. Since the beginning of their friendship, Faulkner often wondered what motivated East's steadfast commitment to the fight for racial equality. Although Faulkner also held unconventional views as a white southerner, he struggled to comprehend East's extremism in Mississippi's intensely repressive environment. East captured the complexity of his own character in his autobiography *The Magnolia Jungle: The Life, Times and Education of a Southern Editor* when he stated, "while Faulkner never put the question to me directly, he seemed interested to know how I happened to hold my views. There it was again. That old, old question, and still I was without an answer that made sense."³⁰⁴

East's comment highlights the driving questions behind this thesis: why did some white southerners risk their lives to participate in the Civil Rights Movement? Why did they give up their privilege as whites to campaign for the rights of others? How did they come to challenge a system that was an entrenched part of southern society? Indeed, looking closely at the lives of P.D. East, Buford Posey, and Ralph Noonkester adds layers to an understanding of what motivated their actions. Both East and Posey began to question segregation after dramatic moments in their lives. For East, it was seeing the charred corpse of the African American girl in his neighborhood. For Posey, it was witnessing Mississippi's persisting inequality after serving in the Second World War. As little information about his youth exists, the rationale behind Noonkester's actions is

³⁰⁴ P.D. East, *The Magnolia Jungle: The Life, Times, and Education of a Southern Editor* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1960), 196.

somewhat less clear. Nonetheless, it is possible that witnessing Ellie Dahmer mourn her husband pushed him to demand change in Hattiesburg more forcefully.

Although these questions are important, the study's main contribution is extending how civil rights activism is defined. In doing so, this work contributes to the emergent trend that examines "the wide Civil Rights Movement."³⁰⁵ For Todd Moyer, part of this means, including individuals who did not necessarily participate in popular forms of non-violent protest. P.D. East, Buford Posey, and Ralph Noonkester add to this revision in demonstrating that different models of activism existed among the southern white community. Although none of the men participated in a formal civil rights march, all took action to undermine the authority of segregation in Mississippi. As a result, a willingness publicly to challenge the system of white supremacy defines their activism. Raised in areas of the Deep South where racism and injustice dominated daily life, these men demonstrated the potential for dissent in what is often viewed as a sea of conformity.

Regardless of any similarity among the three individuals, this study acknowledges the potential for diverse types of activism in different contexts. Consequently, there may be no fixed model of southern white activism. Every challenge was unique, and each activist found support through their individual roots in various organizations. East was part of the South's thriving journalist community, and his interaction with like-minded individuals helped financially to maintain his participation in activism. Posey was linked closely to the Socialist Party, and his affiliation with the *American Socialist* magazine provided him with a forum to discuss publicly his views on racial discrimination.

Noonkester's position as President of Hattiesburg's Chamber of Commerce offered him

³⁰⁵ J. Todd Moyer, *Let The People Decide: Black Freedom and White Resistance Movements in Sunflower County, Mississippi, 1945-1986* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2004), 163.

the power to make changes that positively affected the lives of African Americans in the local community. Investigating their collective experiences offers a more comprehensive account of activism in Mississippi.

Throughout this work, their stories have also introduced larger themes within civil rights historiography. P.D. East's story sheds light on the ways activists, both black and white, worked alongside one another. Exploring his relationship with John Howard Griffin, James Silver, and William D. Campbell suggests that his form of activism relied on an extensive network of encouragement throughout the South. Without Campbell's financial support, East's personal weapon against white supremacy, *The Petal Paper*, would have been shut down much earlier. Posey's story offers a new insight into the extensively researched Freedom Summer murders in 1964. Focusing on his participation in the Movement in the 1950s emphasizes Neshoba County's longer history of activism. His story adds to others like Florence Mars's personal account in *Witness in Philadelphia*, demonstrating that the white community was not entirely homogenous.³⁰⁶ Ralph Noonkester's story provides an unusual lens to view the desegregation of Hattiesburg's schools, emphasizing his importance as a community "bridge leader."³⁰⁷ Furthermore, it presents a new angle to examine the Vernon Dahmer murder in 1966. Looking at the aftermath enriches our understanding of relationships between the black and white communities in Hattiesburg. Additionally, asserting the Chamber of Commerce's role in rebuilding the Dahmer home is important, particularly as this has previously been ignored. Along with telling stories of activism, all three chapters trace

³⁰⁶ Florence Mars, *Witness in Philadelphia* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1977), 12.

³⁰⁷ Belinda Robnett, *How Long, How Long: African American Women in the Struggle for Civil Rights* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1997).

the response by the white opposition. Consequently, the White Citizens' Council, the Ku Klux Klan, and the Mississippi State Sovereignty Commission are particularly important players. Looking at their attempt to prevent East, Posey and Noonkester's involvement in activism sheds further light on their tactics. Economic intimidation, surveillance, and violence are thus prevalent themes throughout.

This study recognizes the limitations of the available sources. Due to a lack of material on Posey's and Noonkester's early life, making persuasive arguments about the effect of their childhood on their later activism is challenging. Where the interpretation of East benefitted from his autobiographical account, similar sources do not exist for either Posey or Noonkester. As a consequence, this study may seem over-reliant on oral histories in parts. Corroborating testimonies with other more traditional documents is crucial because of problems that arise with these types of sources. Where possible, interviews have been supplemented with personal letters, Sovereignty Commission reports, and meeting minutes from organizations including the NAACP and the Chamber of Commerce. Oral histories, nonetheless, are central to the chapters on East and Posey. Todd Moyer highlights their importance, arguing that historians "run a far greater risk of writing incomplete history if we ignore these sources. Oral histories, if rigorously collected and analyzed, offer a rich vein of information and analysis for civil rights historians."³⁰⁸

Although the stories of all three men are compelling, Buford Posey deserves further investigation. His life offers a window to examine certain political and social shifts in the post-war South. One of the most intriguing aspects of Posey's life is seen in

³⁰⁸ Moyer, *Let The People Decide*, 165.

his affiliation with the Socialist Movement. As Posey claimed to have joined the organization at fourteen years old, it is necessary to discover what motivated his decision. In doing so, this will shed light on what led to the spread of socialist ideology in conservative southern cities like Philadelphia, Mississippi. If others like Posey exist, larger conclusions about connections between socialism and the Civil Rights Movement outside of Mississippi can be made.³⁰⁹ At the same time, it would be insightful to consider the way Posey has been remembered for his participation in activism, drawing on the vast field of memory studies. By supporting Truman in 1948, Posey was characterized as “a town eccentric,” “a village idiot,” and even a “drunk.”³¹⁰ These epithets stuck with him for the rest of his life and often appear in scholarly accounts. While Posey was certainly an extraordinary character who had the ability to divide opinion, it is likely that these categorizations have been overemphasized to discredit his voice. After all, the information that Posey provided the FBI in 1964 was accurate, though no one believed him at the time.

It is compelling that East, Posey, and Noonkester participated in forms of civil rights activism so close to one another. All born in the space of five years, they were close in age and spent a significant amount of time in Hattiesburg. East and Posey even attended the University of Southern Mississippi at similar times. Despite these coincidences, there is no evidence that any of the men were acquainted or even crossed paths. This is even more intriguing as East and Posey shared a mutual contact in

³⁰⁹ With access to greater source material it will be possible to conduct a more in depth study on this. There are collections at the University of Tennessee Knoxville, the Wisconsin Historical Society, and the New York Public Library that include documents on Posey’s affiliation with this movement. While his writings for the *American Socialist* magazine were compelling, they were not enough to form a complete analysis.

³¹⁰ Mars, *Witness in Philadelphia*, 95.

Mississippi activist, Medgar Evers. Perhaps their involvement in different institutions prevented their meeting. Nonetheless, the men share something more in common than simply being white, southern, and active in Mississippi. By challenging the entrenched system of segregation in the Magnolia State, these men rejected the racially oppressive environments in which they were raised. In unique ways, each individual offered a powerful contribution to the gradual transformation of Mississippi's "closed society."³¹¹ For that reason, East, Posey and Noonkester deserve their own place in the history of the American Civil Rights Movement.

³¹¹ James W. Silver, *Mississippi: The Closed Society* (New York: Harcourt, Brace & World, 1964).

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