

CHARLES M. PAYNE

*I've Got the Light
of Freedom*

*The Organizing Tradition and the
Mississippi Freedom Struggle*

UNIVERSITY OF CALIFORNIA PRESS
BERKELEY LOS ANGELES LONDON

was always Miss Baker, Fannie Lou Hamer always Mrs. Hamer. Southern Blacks had to struggle for the use of "courtesy titles" and thus often had a different appreciation for them. More particularly, the use of titles was self-consciously a token of the respect and affection that women like Miss Baker and Mrs. Hamer commanded even from young men and women who were frequently contemptuous of social convention. I have followed their usage.

One

SETTING THE STAGE

The show has been put on the road. . . . Three wars, increased migration . . . radio and television have played their parts in creating in [Mississippi] Negroes a dissatisfaction with the status quo. The studied efforts to keep them poor and ignorant have broken down under their own weight.

RUBY HURLEY
NAACP¹

EVERYTHING THAT TOOK place in Mississippi during the 1960s took place against that state's long tradition of systematic racial terrorism. Without some minimal protection for the lives of potential activists, no real opposition to the system of white supremacy was possible. Lynching is only one form of racial terror and statistics on it virtually always underestimate the reality, but between the end of Reconstruction and the modern civil rights era, Mississippi lynched 539 Blacks, more than any other state. Between 1930 and 1950—during the two decades immediately preceding the modern phase of the civil rights movement—the state had at least 33 lynchings.²

The first victim was Dave Harris, shot to death in 1930 by a crowd of 250 white men who believed Harris had killed a young white man near Gunnison, Mississippi. The second and third victims were Pig Lockett and Holly Hite. Arrested for robbery, they were taken from the law enforcement officers by a mob, which hung them. In 1931, Steve Wiley was accused of attempting to assault the wife of a grocery-store owner while he was drunk. She shot him three times. A mob

hung what was left of him from a railroad trestle. A week later, in Vicksburg, Eli Johnson, also accused of an attempted assault on a white woman, was lynched. In November of that year, the body of Coleman Franks was found hanging from a tree limb near Columbus. He had been charged with shooting and wounding a local white farmer. There were no lynchings in 1932, but two in 1933. In July an unnamed Negro man in Caledonia, Mississippi, was hung, accused of insulting a white woman. In Minter City that September, Richard Roscoe got into a fight with a white man. A mob shot him to death, tied his body to the rear of the sheriff's automobile, and paraded it through town before dumping it in front of his home.

Nineteen-thirty-four saw three killings. In Bolivar County, a mob overpowered sheriff's deputies and seized Isaac Thomas and Joe Love, who had been arrested for an alleged attack on a white woman. The men were hung from a railroad trestle. Less than two months later, in Pelahatchie, Mississippi, four white men beat seventy-year-old Henry Bedford to death. A tenant farmer, he was accused of having spoken disrespectfully to one of the whites in the course of a dispute about land rental. The sheriff arrested four whites—for which he suffered some criticism—but no indictments were ever handed down. About a month later, Robert Jones and Smith Houey were hung from a tree near Michigan City. They were accused of killing at least one white man.³

There were seven killings in 1935, three in the month of March alone. On March twelfth, Ab Young was hung from a tree in a school yard near Slayden. Young was wanted in connection with the shooting death of a white highway worker. When he was captured, the mob had an argument about whether to burn him or turn him over to the sheriff in Holly Springs. The brother of the murdered man had made a plea that Young not be mutilated. While the argument was still going on, a group of about fifty went off to hang him. He was allowed to sing a hymn, which he was able to do in a clear, unfaltering voice, apparently unnerving some of his captors. After he was dead, several in the crowd used his swinging body for target practice. When the lynchers got back to town the burn-him or give-him-to-the-sheriff argument was still going on.⁴ Ten days later in Lawrence County, R. J. Tyronne was shot to death, apparently by neighbors who

thought he had become too prosperous. On the thirtieth of the month, the body of Rev. T. A. Allen, weighted down with chain, was found in the Coldwater River. Allen had been involved in an attempt to organize sharecroppers. In June, R. D. McGee in Wiggins was both hung and shot for his alleged attack on an eleven-year-old white girl. In July, Bert Moore and Dooley Morton, both young farmers, were hung near Columbus, also for an alleged attack on a white woman. Bodie Bates was hung from a bridge in August for the same reason. In September, a mob in Oxford, site of the University of Mississippi, hung Ellwood Higginbotham, who was being tried for the murder of a white planter.

In 1936, J. B. Grant, seventeen years old, was shot over a hundred times by a mob, tied to an automobile, and dragged through the streets of Laurel before being hung from a railroad trestle. What he had done to deserve this is not known. It was a record fifteen months before the next killing, but that one proved particularly brutal: Roosevelt Townes and "Bootjack" McDaniel, both in their mid-twenties, were accused of murdering a white man and were taken from the sheriff by a mob. Three or four hundred people, including women and children, took them to a clearing in the woods near Duckhill, where they were chained to trees. According to one report, the mob turned on McDaniels first. A blowtorch was applied to his chest until he confessed, after which he was shot. The blowtorch was applied to Townes for as much as an hour; it was used to burn off his fingers and ears individually. While he was still alive, brush and wood were piled at his feet and fired with gasoline, finally burning him to death.⁵

During the first half of 1938, there were no lynchings anywhere in the South, perhaps in part because, in the wake of the Duckhill slayings, federal anti-lynching legislation was gaining new support. In the second half of the year, there were seven lynchings, four in Mississippi, in which the NAACP estimated a total of six hundred people took part. Only a few were involved in the murder of Wash Adams, who was beaten to death in Columbus for failing to pay the ten-dollar balance on his wife's funeral bill. In the Delta town of Rolling Fork, a blacksmith named Tom Green refused to do some work ordered by the plantation manager. Green was fired and then got into an argument with R. Purdy Flanagan, the plantation owner, about who

owned which tools. Shooting started; Green was wounded but Flanagan was killed. Green holed up in his cabin where he was killed after a fifteen-minute gun battle with a mob of three hundred. His body was dragged by car to the place where he had killed Flanagan, doused with gasoline and burned, then dragged into town and burned again. That was near the beginning of July. Near the end of the month a mob in Canton shot and killed Claude Banks as he was driving home. In November, a mob of perhaps two hundred killed Wilder McGowan in Wiggins. McGowan was accused of assaulting a white woman.

Where we have more than fragmentary details about these cases, it is often because of the work of NAACP investigators, usually native white southerners. Their work repeatedly demonstrated that the underlying stories were much at variance with reported versions. Stories about sheriffs being "overpowered" by mobs often turned out to be cases of collusion between sheriffs and the mobs—although they also found cases where law-enforcement people did everything they could to protect their prisoners, sometimes successfully. Of course, investigators frequently found that the actual reasons victims were selected had no relationship to their alleged transgression. The crowd at Duck Hill may have seized Roosevelt Townes partly because he was a bootlegger in a part of the state where that occupation was thought a white man's prerogative.

Wilder McGowan was probably killed because he had trouble grasping the whole idea of white man's prerogative. On November 20, a Mrs. Murray reported that at about eight P.M. she had been attacked and robbed by a light-skinned colored man with straight hair. The seventy-four-year-old Mrs. Murray was a member of one of the area's prominent white families. A posse estimated at two hundred men descended upon the local Negro quarters and ordered that no one leave. One woman, thinking the order applied only to men, tried to leave for her job; she was hit on the head with a pistol butt and told to "git back." Bloodhounds led the posse through a rooming house. Learning that one resident, Wilder McGowan, age twenty-four, was not there, the mob became interested in him. When he returned home, he was taken into the nearby woods and hung.

In many respects, McGowan was an unlikely choice. Several witnesses could have accounted for his whereabouts during the time the crime was committed. He was dark-skinned, so he didn't fit Mrs. Murray's description. He was never taken before Mrs. Murray for identification. The NAACP investigator concluded that McGowan was selected because he had had several altercations with whites:

On one occasion when he refused to run as other Negroes did when ordered to do so by some armed whites in an automobile, he was attacked but beat his assailants and took a revolver from one of them. Recently, he was suspected of having slashed with a knife one of a group of whites who visited a Negro dance hall "looking for some good-looking nigger women." It is known that he was one of two or three young Negro men who resented the slur on their women and had a fist fight with the whites. He called for the lights to be put out and in the darkness the whites were badly beaten and one cut on the arm.

"After they had Linched him," McGowan's uncle wrote the NAACP a year later, "they claim that they caught the right negroes But still Wilder is dead." In a larger sense, Wilder was the right Negro.⁶

The McGowan case was closer to the rule than to the exception. Southwide, allegations of rape were made in about one-sixth of all lynchings (but probably in one hundred percent of all southern speeches about lynching). Immediately after it was founded, the Association of Southern Women for the Prevention of Lynching (ASWPL) made an attempt to find out how many of the charges of rape had any validity:

These investigations showed that white men, determined to get rid of a certain Negro, would accuse him of an attempted sex crime. They knew that officers would approve without question their action for this offense. . . . While in some instances the weight of the evidence supported the charge of attempted rape, investigations of many lynchings indicated so strongly that white women . . . were merely a front for lynchers that no report of a lynching for the

protection of a white woman could be accepted as true until it was verified.⁷

Of course, mobs had their own understanding of what constituted "assault"; looking a white woman in the eye could be enough.

Near the end of the thirties, Canton, Mississippi, had two killings, both of which, according to an NAACP investigator, reflected, in different ways, a trend toward "quieter" lynchings. In July of 1938, a white man named A. B. McAdam visited the city to see his daughter who was hospitalized there. After he left the hospital, he was, he claimed, attacked and robbed by a Black man. Law-enforcement officers and citizens decided to blockade the part of town where the incident was supposed to have taken place. At the same time, Claude Banks, twenty-two-year-old son of a prosperous Negro funeral home owner, was driving home from a party. As he drove by the blockade, members of the mob opened fire with pistols and shotguns, apparently making no effort to stop the car. Witnesses said that both deputies and police officers were among those doing the shooting. Banks was killed. His companion, Willie Jones, was arrested and roughed up before being released with the warning that if he ever said anything he would catch "sudden pneumonia"—that is, be killed. Canton's mayor did what he could to keep the story quiet, refusing to cooperate with a photographer who wanted to get a picture of the body—a departure from the older tradition in which murderers, smiling and grinning, posed with the bodies of their victims or pieces thereof, for photos that were sometimes turned into postcards. Claude Banks's father did what he could to keep the issue alive. He went to the mayor and requested the city render some form of compensation for his son's death and then asked a local judge if there were any legal avenues of redress. Both told him that nothing could be done.

Joe Rodgers was killed in Canton in 1939. Active in community affairs, a deacon and choir member at Mount Zion Baptist Church, Rodgers was employed at Dinkman Lumber Mill. He was asked to move into company-owned housing but refused, since that housing was more expensive than what he already had. On Saturday, May 6,

there was an extra deduction from his pay. He was told that the deduction was for rent on a company house. The following Monday, Rodgers raised the issue with a foreman. Things ended with the foreman striking Rodgers with his fist and then grabbing a spade. Rodgers took the spade away and hit him with it before a friend of Rodgers's separated the two men. It is not known what happened immediately after that, but Joe Rodgers was never seen alive again. That Thursday, a constable found his body in the Pearl River, bound hand and foot and beaten to a pulp. He had been tortured with hot irons. The *Madison County Herald* never mentioned his death, and local residents were ordered not to discuss it.⁸

By the end of the thirties, NAACP officials and members of the ASWPL thought howling mobs were becoming passe. Small groups of men were doing quietly what large crowds used to do publicly. Kangaroo courts and charges of "killed while resisting arrest" were giving racial murder a quasi-legal air. Even when large groups were involved, there were more attempts to suppress news of murders—this in a state where lynchings had previously been announced in the newspapers a couple of days in advance in order to give the country people time to get to town.

World War II brought new possibilities of racial tension. On the one hand, whites worried that those Blacks who served in the armed forces would come back with "biggity" ideas. On the other hand, some whites felt that not enough Black men were going to war. Blacks were more likely to be excluded from service for reasons of health or illiteracy, leaving some whites feeling that there were too many Black men around. Nonetheless, the state's lynching rate did not change much during the war years; there were three in 1943, one more in 1944.

The 1943 killings were only a week apart, separated by only a few miles. The first involved two fourteen-year-old boys, Charlie Lang and Ernest Green, arrested for attempting to rape a thirteen-year-old white girl near the small town—population fourteen hundred—of Quitman. The sheriff claimed the boys had confessed. On October 12, a small group of men supposedly overpowered the constable at the jail and took the boys. They were found hanging from a beam of the

bridge where the incident had taken place. The bridge was a traditional site for lynching in Clarke County. In 1918, four Negroes, two of them pregnant women, had been hung there for alleged complicity in the death of a local dentist.

Subsequent investigation of the 1943 killing by the NAACP again raised doubts about just what had happened. The girl and the two boys were friends, and they frequently played together, often around the bridge. On that day, according to the report of the NAACP's Madison Jones,

they were running and jumping when the girl ran out from under the bridge and the boys behind her. A passing motorist saw them and the result you know. The boys were mutilated in the following fashion. Their reproductive organs were cut off. Pieces of flesh had been jerked away from their bodies with pliers and one boy had a screw driver rammed down his throat so that it protruded from his neck.⁹

The Quitman killings may have inspired the killers of Howard Wash, killed just five days later about thirty miles away. Wash had been tried and found guilty of murdering his employer, a local dairy farmer. He had pleaded self-defense, and the fact that the jury that convicted him refused to recommend the death penalty may indicate that some of its members found some validity in his claim. He was sentenced to life imprisonment, but a crowd broke into the jail and seized and hung him.

In 1944, the Reverend Isaac Simmons was farming 295 acres of land in Amite County. For a couple of years, a group of white men had been trying to get him to sell the land, but he had no interest in that. Simmons, sixty-six years of age, went to a lawyer to make certain that there would be no trouble about transferring the property to his children. Word of his visit to the lawyer got out. On the morning of March 26, six armed white men picked up Simmons and one of his sons and drove them to a thicketed area where Simmons was told to get out of the car. He tried to run, but two shotgun blasts caught him in the back. The killers then reloaded the shotgun, walked over to where he had fallen, and shot him a third time. His son, who had

been forced to watch, was beaten and given ten days to get off the land. When the son returned with friends to reclaim his father's body, he found that all of his father's teeth had been knocked out with a club—presumably after he was already dead—and his arm broken and his tongue cut out.¹⁰

Such mutilations—parading dead bodies around the town, shooting or burning bodies already dead, severing body parts and using them for souvenirs, using corkscrews to pull spirals of flesh from living victims or roasting people over slow fires—were as much a part of the ritual of lynching as the actual act of killing. They sent a more powerful message than straightforward killing would have sent, graphically reinforcing the idea that Negroes were so far outside the human family that the most inhuman actions could be visited upon them.

There were two more killings after the war. In 1946, Leon McTate of West, Mississippi, was whipped to death by six white men who accused him of stealing a saddle. In July of 1949, Malcolm Wright was riding in his wagon with his wife and four children near Houston, Mississippi. Three white men in an automobile, angered because they could not pass the wagon on the narrow road, beat Wright to death while his family watched, the last Mississippi killing listed by the NAACP before the fifties.

The Wright killing, perhaps more eloquently than the more brutal slayings or the spectacle lynchings, underscores how tenuous Black life was. The point was that there did not have to be a point; Black life could be snuffed out on whim, you could be killed because some ignorant white man didn't like the color of your shirt or the way you drove a wagon. Mississippi Blacks had to understand that viscerally. Those who wanted to work for change had to understand that they were challenging a system that could and would take their lives casually.

THE STRUCTURAL BACKGROUND OF CHANGE

As terrible as the lynchings of the thirties and forties were, the system of racial violence was by then in decline, in part because the cotton-based political and economic system from which it had grown was

declining. The increasing difficulty of maintaining a way of life in Mississippi based on cotton was a particularly important change for the Mississippi Delta.

Roughly the northwestern quarter of the state, bounded on the west by the Mississippi River, the Delta is flat and treeless, with soil so rich that it frequently produced a tenth of the nation's cotton crop, cotton of very high quality. In 1935, David Cohn, a Delta native and a firm believer in white supremacy, wrote "Cotton is more than a crop in the Delta, it is a form of mysticism. It is a religion and a way of life"—a way of life, as he noted elsewhere, dependent above all else upon Black labor.¹¹ Most Delta counties were three-quarters Black, and the Blacks were overwhelmingly agricultural laborers, tenant farmers, and domestics. They were a poor and suppressed population even as compared to Blacks in the rest of Mississippi. As Blacks from other states feared going to Mississippi, Blacks from the hill counties or piney woods of Mississippi were frequently reluctant to venture into the Delta. SNCC's Dorie Ladner, who had grown up in Hattiesburg, recalls being terrified on her first trip into the Delta and being amazed to learn that in 1962 there were still places where there were curfews for Negroes. It seemed to her that whatever was left over from slavery had been left in the Delta.

One of the most detailed portraits we have of traditional Delta life is that by the anthropologist Hortense Powdermaker. Her *After Freedom* is a study of the Delta town of Indianola in Sunflower County during the early 1930s. She describes a world structured around cotton production. Delta cotton production was organized around vast plantations rather than the smaller farms that dominated other parts of the state. The great majority of Delta Blacks were either sharecroppers or renters on a plantation. Individual landlords could be better or worse, but the system itself was profoundly corrupt, a form of life Blacks repeatedly said was only marginally better than slavery.¹²

Sharecroppers were vulnerable to all manner of exploitation. Powdermaker estimates that twenty-five or thirty percent of them may have gotten an honest settlement at the end of the year. Since sharecroppers and tenants were largely illiterate, without recourse to the law, and often unable even to move to a different plantation without

the permission of their landlord, less scrupulous landowners were free to do as they chose. Indeed, it was for just this reason that Black tenants were preferred to white ones. Blacks could be more easily squeezed; poor whites were thought to be too "independent."¹³ Even without the rapacity of landlords, cropping on shares barely allowed much more than a subsistence existence except in boom years. In 1932, Powdermaker's first year in the Delta, she estimates that seventeen or eighteen percent of those cropping on shares in Sunflower County made some profit, ranging from \$30 to \$150 for the year. The rest broke even or ended the year in debt. If the one study she cites is representative, half the Black families in the Delta could not afford a minimally decent diet.¹⁴ Most could not even hope that their children, through education, could make a better life. The school calendar was built around the cotton season, which meant that most Black youngsters were in school only when they weren't needed in the fields. (Aaron Henry, who as an adult would be among the important most Black leaders in Mississippi, as a child asked his mother why he could only go to school for five months while the white kids went seven. She answered that it was because he was smarter than white kids; they needed extra time.)

Powdermaker did her work in the 1930s, the last decade in which she could have seen the cotton economy in relatively pure form. Change had been in motion at least since tractors first appeared in the Delta during the First World War. In the 1930s, flame cultivators were introduced that for thirty-five cents an acre cleared land that cost a dollar to clear by hand, even when hoe hands were only making a dollar a day. The 1940s saw the development of the first commercially viable cotton harvester, a machine capable of doing the work of forty or more pickers.¹⁵

While cotton production was being mechanized, competition from synthetics and cheap foreign cotton made cotton a less valuable crop. During the Depression, the bottom fell out of the cotton market. Across the South, the average price of a pound of cotton, which had been thirty-five cents in 1919, dropped to six cents in 1931. In Mississippi it fell to nine cents. Delta farmers began switching to other crops—corn, oats, soybeans—all requiring much less labor than cot-

ton.¹⁶ By the 1960s, modernized plantations found they needed barely a fifth of their former work force.

Suddenly most Blacks had no economic function. Schemes to reduce the size of the Black population became a popular subject of discussion. The Great Migration during World War I had generated near-panic among wealthier whites. Labor agents from the North were shot at, beaten, harassed with every legal device planters could think of. Blacks caught trying to leave might be jailed or even strung up as a lesson to others. By the 1950s, gubernatorial candidates were competing to see who could promise to drive the greatest number of Negroes from the state in the shortest period of time.

The separation of Negroes from the soil unraveled the balance of political and economic forces that had defined their place since shortly after the Civil War.¹⁷ It meant, for example, increased out-migration of Blacks from the South to the North and West, a process accelerated by the northern demand for labor during World War II. During the 1940s, 1.6 million Blacks left the South, to be followed by almost 1.5 million during the 1950s. The North's new Black voters created a counterforce to the Dixiecrats who had previously enjoyed a virtual stranglehold on national policy concerning race. The new Black vote mattered enough that by 1940 the national Democratic platform spoke to the question of equal protection under the law for the first time. Referring to that period, historian David Lewis says, "Although isolation of any single election factor risks presenting a false picture, the reality that Afro-American votes were now determinative in 16 non-South states with 278 electoral votes escaped no serious political strategist."¹⁸ In contrast, the white South controlled only 127 electoral votes.

Since the end of Reconstruction, the federal government had essentially taken a hands-off stance to the South's way of doing business. It amounted to tacit national support for southern racism. The withering of that support constituted a fundamental shift in the balance of forces. It meant, for example, that the South could be threatened with federal anti-lynching legislation. No such legislation ever passed, but the threat of it was salutary. Southwide, 1923 saw the sharpest one-year decrease in the number of lynchings in thirty-five years—from

sixty-one the previous year to twenty-eight in 1923—a decrease attributed by the NAACP partly to the northward migration and partly to the first sustained agitation for a federal anti-lynching bill. By 1938, Senator Wagner of New York thought a clear pattern had been established: "Experiences in 1922, 1934 and 1935 demonstrated that the number of lynchings declined with significant regularity while anti-lynching legislation was pending in Congress, only to rise again when hope for passage of such legislation died." The pattern repeated itself in 1938, which saw a complete cessation of lynching across the South for the first six months of the year, while another bill was being discussed, only to have lynchings start up again almost as soon as Congress adjourned.¹⁹

Under the new political order, it became possible to have the FBI investigate racial murders. By the end of 1942, they had investigated at least five killings. Even though they took the position that there were grounds for federal involvement only in cases where state officials were involved in lynchings, their investigations did lead, directly or indirectly, to some people being indicted, including some in both the Howard Wash and the Isaac Simmons lynchings cited above. In Mississippi, of course, it was impossible to find a jury that would convict, but even the idea that lynchers could be indicted was a new thought for Mississippi, a clear reminder that the outside world was beginning to impinge in uncomfortable ways.²⁰

An equally important factor in the gradual decline of racial terror may have been the collapse of the cotton economy, which led to less need to control Blacks, either through the near-peonage of sharecropping or through violence. Prior to the turn of the century racial lynchings across the South averaged around one hundred a year. Between 1900 and 1920, they fluctuated between fifty and seventy. By 1935, after the arrival of nickel-a-pound cotton, the number dropped to eighteen, and for the next twenty years it would not rise above eight in any one year.²¹ There continued to be non-economic reasons for controlling Blacks, obviously, but economic changes removed one of the traditional pillars of the system.

In the early 1930s, according to Arthur Raper's classic study of lynching, Mississippi officials prevented fourteen lynchings, more

than they allowed to take place. Hortense Powdermaker, conducting her study of Sunflower County at the same time, concluded that the fear of outside opinion was a potent factor in reducing community support for the mob. By the thirties, newspapers in larger Southern cities typically criticized lynchings, at least in principle. By the forties, their criticisms were clearly linked to fear of outside scrutiny. In 1943, for example, the Jackson *Clarion-Ledger* warned that the federal government was trying to find a way to bring lynching under federal jurisdiction, "a fact which all citizens, all law officers, and all court officials, should keep in mind constantly." The only absolutely certain way to block the menace of federal encroachment, they stressed, "is to prevent lynchings in the future, through education, through suasion, and by giving every prisoner or suspect full and adequate protection until the guilty are punished through due process of law."²²

While political agitation was becoming more effective, the collapse of the cotton-based economy simultaneously removed the most fundamental reason for controlling Blacks. Lynching patterns had always been related in complicated ways to economic factors. In the Delta, the most common months for lynching were June and July, the months of the cotton season when cotton needs the least labor. Between the turn of the century and the Depression, there was a consistent relationship across the South between the price of cotton and the number of lynchings. In relatively prosperous times, lynchings were fewer. When whites were feeling more economic pressure, they were more likely to turn to rope and faggot.²³ In the midst of the Depression, with cotton at a nickel a pound, the correlation was broken. Instead of going up, as one would have predicted from past patterns, the number of lynchings went down. Economic insecurity during the Depression affected different classes of whites in different ways. Poor whites traditionally made up the majority of the mobs. Jessie Daniel Ames of the Association of Southern Women for the Prevention of Lynching pointed out that those poor whites reached by New Deal programs actually may have had more cash money in their pockets than they were accustomed to and thus had less need of "finding a Negro to lynch to prove their supremacy." For wealthier whites in the South, lynching was beginning to look counterproductive. In 1939,

Ames noted, "we have managed to reduce lynchings . . . not because we've grown more law-abiding or respectable but because lynchings became such bad advertising. The South is going after big industry at the moment and a lawless, lynch-mob population isn't going to attract very much outside capital."²⁴

In the middle, shopkeepers in small towns, finding themselves hard-pressed to keep and find customers, began to relax some of the traditional rituals of degradation. In the Delta, according to Powdermaker:

Under stress of hard times, the shopkeepers made an effort to attract Negro trade as they had never done before. Negro customers were no longer kept waiting indefinitely for attention. In many cases, they were permitted to try on garments rather than, as before, being required to buy shoes, gloves, hats, without first finding out whether they were the right size or shape. Once such concessions have been granted, they cannot easily be withdrawn.²⁵

In small ways as well as large ones, careful observers during the Depression could see that the old system was eroding, creating opportunities for activism that had not existed before.

THE BLACK RESPONSE

Changes in the structural underpinnings of racism wouldn't have mattered if Black Mississippians weren't willing to challenge the system. There were always people who resisted, as witnessed by the slayings of Wilder McGowan and the Reverend T. A. Allen, killed in 1935 for organizing sharecroppers. In the 1940s, the pace of activism picked up, often in direct response to changes originating outside the state.

The generation of Black Mississippians coming to adulthood in the late 1940s had a stronger sense of entitlement than their parents. By 1947, the Delta's David Cohn could lament:

The younger generation of Negroes is sharply at odds with their elders. If the latter suggest moderation in racial points of view, if they

say that the world cannot be changed in a day, younger Negroes are likely to dismiss them contemptuously as "handkerchief heads" or "Uncle Toms"—epithets taken from the Northern Negro press, whose often reckless and irresponsible outpourings they avidly read.²⁶

It wouldn't take much for a man of Cohn's disposition to see a militant behind every other plow, but more judicious observers saw similar changes. Samuel Adams, studying one hundred sharecropper families in the Delta in the mid-1940s, found "evidence of a growing race consciousness" in their changing musical tastes. Increasingly, the songs that were popular were those that ridiculed whites, made subtle protests against segregation, or tried to stimulate racial pride.²⁷

Hortense Powdermaker detected more aggressive attitudes emerging among Blacks in the early 1930s. While she found every possible shading of opinion among Blacks of every age and every status grouping, there were discernible patterns, with the most consistent patterns centering on age. The oldest generation, those over sixty at the time of the study, had been both either in slavery or just after the Civil War. They were the generation most prone to put their trust in "good" white people and most prone to believe that Blacks were indeed inferior to whites. Still, they resented the suffering the system imposed on them. Among this generation, both belief and behavior tended to acknowledge white superiority.

Their children, though, born just before the turn of the century, more typically continued to behave as if they accepted the superiority of whites but seldom really believed it. They grew up having less intimate contact with whites than had their parents, and many of them, with at least the rudiments of literacy and exposure to newspapers, movies, and the radio, were more aware of the world beyond the plantation. They held that Blacks were just as good as whites but recognized as a plain fact of life that such a belief could not be acted on publicly. In the presence of whites, they presented the countenance whites typically wanted to see—respectful, content, subservient.

Some derived a fleeting sense of superiority from their ability to deceive whites.

The children of that generation, people born in the early years of the century, exhibited a great deal more resentment at their station in life. They considered themselves entitled to equal treatment and were much less comfortable than their parents had been with the elaborate codes of ritual deference, a dilemma they resolved by trying to avoid contact with whites as much as possible. Similarly, the better-educated Blacks of whatever generation tended to be more visibly angry about the injustices and indignities of the system, and they, too, reacted by minimizing their contact with whites. For those who had too much pride to greet a white man with the traditional "Howdy, boss," or some equally humiliating variant, avoiding contact altogether was the next best thing.²⁸

Powdermaker is careful to say that the more bitter, resentful attitudes characterized only a "dissenting minority," but "it is their attitude that is spreading and the more passive one that is on the wane as . . . ideas of what is due the individual citizen penetrate ever more deeply into the Negro group."²⁹ While these attitudes in the 1930s seldom expressed themselves politically, that potential was clearly present. She reports that one young man, whom she presents as typical of the better-educated Negroes, "recognizes his inability to vote as the crucial point. For him the vote has become the symbol of the kernel of the inter-racial situation. He maintains that . . . only a need for the votes of the Negroes will bring justice to them in work, in conditions of living, in the courts."³⁰

By the 1940s, that attitude among Mississippi Blacks had begun to grow into various forms of political mobilization, much of it based in Jackson, the state's largest urban center. In the middle of the decade, T. B. Wilson, secretary of the Jackson NAACP ("Niggers, Apes, Alligators, Coons and Possums," according to the old racist joke), organized a chapter of the National Progressive Voters League. The *Jackson Advocate*, like many Black papers of the day, supported the drive vigorously. Response was slow at first but quickened with the 1944 Supreme Court decision outlawing the white primary. Before that

decision, Wilson said, people were "indifferent, disinterested, but when we worked up this case of registering and voting them because the Supreme Court decision gave us to understand that we could vote, then they began to go register."³¹

✓ The importance of the white-primary decision is still not widely appreciated. In much of the South, allowing only whites to vote in primary elections had been the most effective means of wholesale disenfranchisement. Once that became illegal, there was an almost immediate surge in Black registration, which historian David Garrow sees as the true beginning of Black political emergence in the South. In 1940, only three percent of Southern Blacks were registered, a figure that had not changed much since the turn of the century. By 1947, twelve percent were registered; by 1952, twenty percent.³²

Negro veterans played an important role in the change. Like their predecessors from the First World War, some of them returned to the South with a new sense of the proper order of things. All across the South Negro veterans tried to register and protested attempts to keep them from doing so. In Birmingham in 1946, one hundred veterans marched to the courthouse to demand the right to vote. Mississippi had sent 83,000 Negroes into the segregated armed forces of World War II. In keeping with the southern patriotic tradition, some towns in Mississippi actually encouraged Black veterans to register (if not always to vote), but they were exceptional.³³

Veterans became a factor in what was probably the most significant mobilization of Mississippi Blacks in the forties, the hearings on Senator Theodore Bilbo. For all of his long career, Bilbo had been a symbol of the most virulent sort of racism, best summarized by his famous admonition that the best way to keep a Negro from the polls on election day was to pay him a visit at home the evening before, a message he spread with increased vigor after the all-white primary was outlawed. Indeed, some observers thought many white Mississippians would have accepted the decision had not Bilbo and others whipped up a campaign against it.

After Bilbo's reelection in 1946, the national NAACP, in conjunction with organized labor and other groups Bilbo had offended, led a drive to convince the Senate to refuse to seat him, on the grounds that Bilbo

had been a leader in the disenfranchisement of Blacks. At the hearing held in Jackson, Black veterans testified for three days. Moreover, Negroes packed the courtroom, perhaps the most significant act of public defiance from Negroes the state had seen in decades. County registrar after county registrar faced the national press and detailed with great honesty exactly how hard they worked to keep the voting rolls white, by advising Negroes not to try to register, by threatening those who didn't recognize good advice when they heard it, by employing a double standard on the literacy requirement.³⁴ Their candor was a gauge of how little some Mississippians of that period worried about the opinions of the outside world.

Bilbo died before the Senate reached a final decision on his seating, but he had served a purpose, providing Blacks with a symbol so universally hated that Mississippi Blacks with some help from out of state were able to mobilize publicly against it. In the context of this mobilization, Black voter registration rose steadily. There were an estimated two thousand registered Negroes in the state in 1940, twenty-five hundred in 1946, but five thousand in 1947, a one-hundred-percent increase in a year. (Even so, that amounted to about one percent of the eligible Negroes in the state, the lowest figure in the South. In 1946 in rural Leflore County, where Greenwood is located, twenty-six of the county's thirty-nine thousand Negroes were on the rolls, none of whom voted.) ✓ "Negro leaders in the state point out that perhaps the most crucial factor in this remarkable increase was the stimulation and courage" provided by the Bilbo hearing. The surge in Black registration started immediately after the war and continued for several years. There were seventeen thousand on the rolls by 1952, of whom perhaps fifty-six hundred were voting. The number of registrants peaked around 1954 or 1955, somewhere between twenty and twenty-five thousand, the highest figure in the twentieth century.³⁵

Characteristically, Mississippi made less progress between the late forties and the early fifties than did nearby states. In that period, Mississippi saw a fourfold increase in Black registration. Both Alabama and Louisiana, the two states which, after Mississippi, were considered most determined to keep Blacks from the polls, changed

more rapidly during the same years. In Louisiana, Black registration went from ten thousand to one hundred thousand. Even in Alabama, it went from six thousand to fifty thousand, an eightfold increase.³⁶

The southern states as a whole, of course, had developed a long list of tactics to minimize Black voting. Among them were requiring one or more white character witnesses; requiring only Black applicants to show property tax receipts; strict enforcement of literacy tests against Negro applicants; rejecting Black applicants because of technical mistakes in filling out registration forms or requiring Black applicants to fill out their own forms while those of whites were filled out by registration officials; a variety of evasive tactics, such as claiming that registration cards had run out, that all members of the registration board had to be present, or that it was closing time; putting difficult questions about the Constitution to Negro applicants; holding registration in private homes, which Blacks were reluctant to enter.³⁷ Where other sections of the South relied primarily on a few such tactics, Mississippi, according to Margaret Price, appeared to use them all. As late as 1954, in the thirteen Mississippi counties that had majority Negro populations a *total* of fourteen votes were cast by Blacks in that year's elections.

The general pattern across the state obscured significant variations within the state. According to one 1951 NAACP report:

In Jackson County there appear to be no voting restrictions. In George County Negroes are denied the right to vote; in Magee one Negro is encouraged to vote but the general Negro population is discouraged; in Washington County Negroes are invited to vote; in Sunflower County (Indianola) some Negroes are permitted, others are not. There are some counties in which Negroes are not permitted to pay their poll tax but are permitted to register; consequently they can't vote. In Jefferson Davis County there are different regulations in different towns. In Mt. Carmel, which is predominately, if not entirely Negro, ballot boxes are provided for the Negroes in the general election; they are manned by them, but no boxes are provided for the primary, which means in effect Negroes are denied the right to vote.³⁸

The figure of twenty or twenty-five thousand registrants in Mississippi by the mid-fifties is hardly impressive in a state with an adult Negro population of nearly half a million. Still, it represents a tenfold increase in fifteen years, a rapid enough change to suggest some underlying qualitative shift in the political activity of Blacks. The same is suggested by the growing state NAACP membership. In 1949, the records of the national office listed twenty-three branches with a total of one thousand members. Southern branches were frequently short-lived. By 1951, there were only seventeen branches in the state, but they still claimed about one thousand members. In 1952, membership crept up to thirteen hundred; by the end of 1954, it reached twenty-seven hundred, still a small number but double the 1952 figure.³⁹

The rising numbers of Black voters and NAACP members were not the only reasons in the early 1950s for thinking that the South, even Mississippi, had begun to turn away from the past. In Mississippi, median Negro family income was up, with almost all the increase associated with urban families. Racist violence across the South was less common than it had been. In Mississippi between 1946 and 1949, one observer found no evidence of significant Klan activity.⁴⁰ In 1952, for the first time in seventy years, Tuskegee Institute could not find an example of a lynching in the South. The more underground forms of racial killings continued, of course, and race-related bombings continued to occur, but observers thought even the latter might have their silver lining. A bombing may be the act of a lone individual or two and is a form of violence preferred by people who are afraid of being caught.⁴¹

In urban areas and the upper South, barriers to Negro registration were lowered, and Blacks even ran for office. In all areas of the South, even Mississippi, interracial groups such as the Southern Regional Conference had begun to work publicly for change. "Mississippi Negroes," said a Jackson newspaper in the mid-fifties, "have a gleam in their eyes and a feeling that they have a foot in the door." Another observer, sympathetic and well informed, said "It is to be hoped that the 1950s may be a decade of citizenship fully realized."⁴²

Some very experienced Black activists were similarly optimistic. The NAACP's Ruby Hurley, in a memo written as late as 1955, noted an

increase in the number of threats against NAACP officers in the state but also observed that people did not seem unduly worried by them. "Although our people are terribly annoyed, they are not frightened as they might have been a few years ago." She was meeting some determined Negroes, people who were telling her, "We just want our rights; we want to vote like the white folks do. . . . And they can pressure all they want, it won't make no difference. We ain't always eaten so high on the hog, we can eat poor again."

In his year-end report for 1954, E. J. Stringer, who had suffered various forms of harassment for serving as president of the NAACP State Conference of Branches, was full of optimism. In 1955, he thought, it should be possible to have at least one branch in each of the state's eighty-two counties; successful school integration was forthcoming. T. R. M. Howard, president of the Regional Council of Negro Leadership (RCNL), had also been harassed—at the age of 47, his draft board reclassified him I-A—but still thought the future looked promising. In 1954, he noted that while three-fourths of Mississippi whites would take up arms to defend segregation, another year or so might change a great many attitudes.⁴³

Partly because of economic change inside the state, partly because of Mississippi's increasing involvement with the social currents of the world outside the state, racial terror was no longer as common or as effective as it had been. If some observers were optimistic about the state's future, we may be sure that many others had to be uncertain. There was no way to tell how meaningful the apparent changes were until someone tested them.

Two

TESTING THE LIMITS

Black Activism in Postwar Mississippi

*The Eldest have borne much. We who are younger will
neither see so much, nor live so long.*

KING LEAR
Act III

WE DO NOT ORDINARILY REALIZE how much the well-publicized activism of the sixties depended upon the efforts of older activists who worked in obscurity throughout the 1940s and the 1950s. In Mississippi, Amzie Moore, Medgar Evers, and Aaron Henry were among those whose work connected most directly with the movement of the 1960s.

AMZIE MOORE: A SPIRIT BEYOND THE AVERAGE MAN

If asked to choose one person as the forerunner of the work they did in Mississippi in the 1960s and particularly of their work in the Delta, veteran SNCC workers would overwhelmingly choose Amzie Moore. Born in 1912, Moore grew up largely on the Wilkin plantation in Grenada County, just north of Greenwood. He was still a child when his parents separated and was only fourteen when his mother died. His father came back to take the two younger children but left Amzie pretty much on his own, floating from one relative to another for three years. Eventually, he went to Greenwood, where he lived catch-