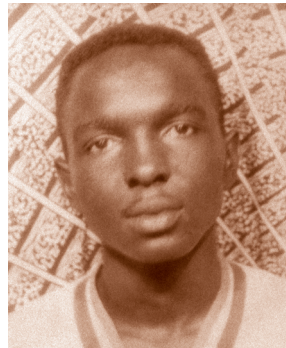


the end of freedom school



JAMES CHANEY
1943-1964
Civil rights worker
abducted and slain
by Klansmen,
Philadelphia, Miss.



ANDREW GOODMAN
1943-1964
Civil rights worker
abducted and slain
by Klansmen,
Philadelphia, Miss.

Mount Zion Methodist Church had stood solid since the turn of the century, but by Sunday, June 21, 1964, nothing was left except a pile of bricks and ashes, a few charred hymnals, and the church bell.

Three young civil rights workers — James Chaney, Andrew Goodman and Michael Schwerner — stood amid the rubble, staring dismally at what would have been their first Freedom School. Church members had only reluctantly agreed to make their building available for civil rights activities for fear that something like this would happen.

Now their church was in ruins. Several of its members had been beaten by Klansmen, and the three civil rights workers were in danger. The Klansmen who burned the church were looking for Michael Schwerner.

TARGETED

Schwerner, a 24-year-old social worker from New York City, had worked in Meridian for the

Congress of Racial Equality (CORE) since January and had become accustomed to threats. For the Klan and its sympathizers (including many local law enforcement officials), Schwerner was despised as a symbol of the civil rights invasion that was threatening their way of life. They hated him for his friendships with local blacks, for his attempts to challenge segregation and for his open disregard for Southern standards of appearance: He wore a short beard at a time when no respectable Southern man wore facial hair.

The White Knights of the Ku Klux Klan, who nicknamed Schwerner “Goatee,” had plotted to kill him as early as March, but their attempts so far had failed.

Schwerner’s closest associate, James Earl Chaney, had helped convince Mount Zion members to host the Freedom School. Chaney, 21, had grown up in Meridian as the oldest

son of a domestic servant and a traveling plasterer. “J.E.,” as his family called him, had once been suspended from school at age 16 for wearing an NAACP button. By the time he went to work with CORE, he knew better than to broadcast his civil rights views. He rarely discussed his activities, even with his closest friends. It was a reckless line of work for a black Southerner, and Fannie Lee Chaney was worried for her son.

But Chaney was invaluable to CORE. He knew every back road, every farmhouse in the county, and he was behind the wheel when he and Schwerner left the church ruins that Sunday.

The third person in the car with them was Andrew Goodman, an anthropology major from New York who was spending his first day in Mississippi as a volunteer for the Mississippi Summer Project. Goodman had participated in



MICHAEL SCHWERNER
1939-1964
Civil rights worker
abducted and slain
by Klansmen,
Philadelphia, Miss.

OPPOSITE PAGE

The bodies of James Chaney, Andrew Goodman and Michael Schwerner are excavated after an anonymous informer notified law enforcement of their location.

ABOVE

At a press conference, Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. holds photos of the then-missing civil rights workers.

one of the earliest civil rights marches in Washington when he was only 14. At age 16, he had picketed a Woolworth store in New York City in support of the Southern sit-ins.

TRAPPED

When Chaney, Goodman and Schwerner left the church that afternoon, they headed toward Philadelphia, Miss. At the town limits, they were stopped by Neshoba County Deputy Sheriff Cecil Price. Price arrested Chaney for speeding and Goodman and Schwerner for the arson of Mount Zion church. (The ludicrous charge was a familiar ploy of Whites who claimed civil rights workers staged their own violence to create sympathy for their cause.)

The arrests of Chaney, Goodman and Schwerner set a long-awaited plan into motion.

Klansmen immediately began gathering at the home of a member in Meridian. Job assignments were handed out, directions given, meeting times coordinated. Three Klansmen were sent out to buy rubber gloves. Another was assigned to contact a local bulldozer operator.

Deputy Price jailed the civil rights workers without letting them use the telephone. Then, about 10 o’clock that night, he suddenly released them and ordered them to return to Meridian. Chaney, Goodman and Schwerner had not gone far before Price pulled them over again. This time, he was accompanied by two carloads of Klansmen.

Chaney was struck with a blackjack as soon as he stepped out of the car. All three were ordered into the back seat of Price’s patrol car and then driven to an isolated spot off Highway 19. One by one, the

three young men were taken out of the car and shot at point-blank range. Their bodies were deposited at a nearby farm where an earthen dam was under construction. The bulldozer operator who had been hired by the Klan scooped out a hole for the bodies and built the dam above them.

The disappearance of the three civil rights workers sent shock waves throughout the world. Within hours after their disappearance, top officials at the U.S. Justice Department were notified. Within days, President Johnson met with the parents of Goodman and Schwerner. By the end of the week, 100 FBI agents were assigned to search for the missing men.

Despite widespread talk about the abduction and killings, no one in Neshoba County would tell the FBI what they knew. Some suggested the mur-





RIGHT
Mothers of the slain civil rights workers—Mrs. Chaney, Mrs. Goodman, and Mrs. Schwerner (left to right)—link arms after the funeral service for Andrew Goodman in New York City.

OPPOSITE PAGE
Deputy Sheriff Cecil Price (left) and Sheriff Lawrence Rainey (right) at their trial. Price was found guilty of federal civil rights violations in the murder of the three civil rights workers, and Rainey was acquitted.



ders were a CORE publicity stunt. Others said the three men were troublemakers who got what they deserved. One local white woman spoke out against the murders and lost her Sunday School teaching job as a result. “It has made me understand how Nazi Germany was possible,” said Florence Mars.

The search for the three civil rights workers quickly became the biggest federal investigation ever conducted in Mississippi. The FBI dragged 50 miles of the Pearl River and marched in columns through the swamps, looking for the bodies. Agents interviewed 1,000 people and built up a 150,000-page case file.

Finally, an anonymous informant revealed the location of the bodies in exchange for \$30,000 in federal reward money. The next day, on August 4, a team of FBI agents and a hired bulldozer dug up 10 tons of soil to uncover the decomposed bodies of Chaney, Goodman and Schwerner. They discovered Chaney had been shot three times. In the tightly clenched fist of Andy Goodman they found a handful of soil from the dam.

Thousands of mourners and civil rights leaders attended services for Mickey Schwerner and Andrew Goodman in New York City.

At a Baptist church in Meridian on August 7, veteran CORE worker Dave Dennis rose to speak at James Chaney’s funeral. The typically quiet man, known as an intellectual, looked down to see James’ younger brother Ben crying in the front row, and he was filled with rage. Countless black people, like James Chaney, had given their lives during the struggle



for equality. Now, because two whites were among the victims, the world paid attention.

Dennis reminded the crowd of the martyrs who had gone before: Emmett Till, Mack Parker, Herbert Lee and Medgar Evers. And he said, “I’m not going to stand here and ask anyone not to be angry, not to be bitter tonight!” Dennis struggled to control his voice. “I’m sick and tired, and I ask you to be sick and tired with me. The best way we can remember James Chaney is to demand our rights... If you go back home and sit down and take what these white men in Mississippi are doing to us ... if you take it and don’t do something about it ... then God damn your souls!”

In the months that followed, several Klansmen gave information to the FBI, but no charges were brought until civil rights activists sued for the legal right to prosecute the suspects. Finally, the U.S. Justice Depart-

ment called a federal grand jury and won indictments against 19 men, including police officials and Klansmen, for the murders.

On October 20, 1967, seven Klansmen, including Samuel Bowers and Deputy Price, were found guilty of federal civil rights violations in the deaths of the three men. They were sentenced to prison terms ranging from three to 10 years. Three other defendants were freed by a hung jury, and eight were acquitted. Another, James Jordan, pleaded guilty.

It was the first time a jury in Mississippi had ever convicted Klansmen in connection with the death of a black person or civil rights workers. But it took nearly 30 years to get a conviction on state charges. On June 21, 2005 — the 41st anniversary of the Neshoba County killings — a jury in Philadelphia, Miss., convicted Edgar Ray Killen, 81, on three counts of manslaughter. He was sentenced to 60 years. 🌸