

THE EARLY SIXTIES IN MISSISSIPPI

The early 1960s were turbulent times for Mississippi. Society was strictly segregated along racial lines, and the social, political, and economic rights of blacks were suppressed through violence and other forms of intimidation.

Two entities worked to keep this system of segregation in place; first, the Mississippi State Sovereignty Commission, which was created by an act of the Mississippi Legislature in 1956. The Commission operated at the will of the governor and was given broad powers. In effect, the agency spied on civil rights workers and Mississippi citizens who were involved in integration efforts. Their files, gathered from 1956-1973, are now available for online viewing at www.mdah.state.ms.us.

The second was known as Citizens' Councils. These groups were made up of white men, mostly middle and upper class, and formed in cities and small towns throughout the South in the late 1950s and early 1960s. While they did not typically use violence as a tactic, distinguishing them from the Ku Klux Klan, they shared the Klan's ideology, and they worked to preserve the system of segregation. Despite these groups and an atmosphere of fear and bloodshed, a determined activist movement worked to effect change.

In 1961 over three hundred Freedom Riders were arrested in Jackson and imprisoned for trying to integrate the city's bus and train stations and the airport. In 1962 James Meredith became the first African American to enroll at the University of Mississippi, and two people were killed during protest riots. President John F. Kennedy sent federal marshals and soldiers in to restore order.

In 1963 Jackson saw business boycotts, a sit-in, protest marches, and mass arrests of demonstrators. In June, NAACP field secretary Medgar Evers was assassinated in the driveway of his home in Jackson. His murder struck a national chord, inspiring many to work for Civil Rights.

Eudora Welty called for racial equality through her writing and her participation in the integrated Social Science Forum at Tougaloo College and the *Southern Literary Festival*. She was among a minority of whites who held progressive views on race.

Medgar Wiley Evers

Medgar Wiley Evers was born in 1925 in Decatur, Mississippi. Evers served in Europe during World War II and, after returning, began working for change. In 1946 he attempted to vote but was stopped by a white mob. Evers studied business administration at Alcorn A&M College, where he served as a student body leader and met his future wife, Myrlie Beasley. In 1952 they moved to Mound Bayou, where he worked selling insurance. Evers began organizing chapters of the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP). With the

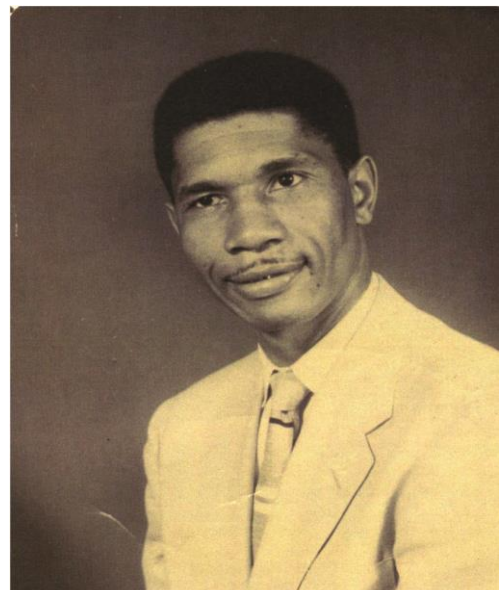


Figure 1: Medgar Wiley Evers. Photo courtesy of the Mississippi Department of Archives and History.

NAACP's support, he applied to the law school at the University of Mississippi but was denied admission because the two required letters of recommendation he supplied were deemed unacceptable.

In 1954 Evers became the NAACP's first field secretary for Mississippi and moved to Jackson with his family. He worked to register voters, organize activists, and establish local NAACP branches throughout the state. Evers also investigated and documented cases of intimidation and racial violence. He assisted blacks who fought for their rights, such as Clyde Kennard, who attempted to integrate the University of Southern Mississippi, and James Meredith, who successfully integrated the University of Mississippi in 1962. Evers informed the NAACP national office and media of the events in Mississippi, drawing the nation's attention to the injustice and violence in the state.

Evers helped organize sit-ins, marches, and boycotts of downtown Jackson businesses. As civil rights activities increased in 1963, Jackson mayor Allen Thompson gave a televised address defending the racial status quo and condemning "subversive" groups. Evers demanded equal time to respond, and his speech aired May 20. Less than a month after the broadcast, Medgar Evers was assassinated in the driveway of his home by Byron De La Beckwith.

Byron De La Beckwith



Figure 2: Byron De La Beckwith. Photo courtesy of the DeLaughter Collection, Mississippi Department of Archives and History.

Born in 1920, Byron De La Beckwith grew up in Greenwood, Mississippi. He served in the marine corps in the Pacific Theater during World War II. He returned to Mississippi in 1946 and worked selling fertilizer and other goods.

Beckwith was an ardent white supremacist and frequently proclaimed his hatred of blacks, Jews, and Roman Catholics. He joined the Greenwood Citizens' Council in 1954 and the Ku Klux Klan in 1963. On the night of June 11, 1963, Beckwith hid in the bushes near the Evers family home. Just after midnight, he shot Evers in the back with a high-powered rifle as he returned from an NAACP meeting. Evers was declared dead shortly after 1:15 a.m. at the University of Mississippi Medical Center.

Beckwith was arrested on June 23. Defended by Governor Ross Barnett's law firm, he was tried twice for the Evers murder before all-white juries in 1964. Both trials ended when juries could not reach a unanimous verdict, and they were declared mistrials.

Beckwith was brought to trial a third time in 1994, convicted of Evers' murder, and sentenced to life in prison. Afflicted with heart disease, Beckwith died at the age of eighty in 2001.