

# Freedom Summer, 1964



Buford Posey couldn't believe what he read in the March 13, 1996 copy of the Neshoba Democrat, a local newspaper published in Neshoba County, Mississippi. He stared at the picture of officers of the Neshoba County Shriners club. Cecil Ray Price had just been sworn in as the new vice president of the Shriners.

Posey vividly remembered Price and the murders that he had helped commit and cover up thirty two years before. His mind rolled through the events of that fateful summer of 1964 in motion picture sequence. Volunteers from the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee had come to Mississippi in the summer of 1964 as participants in “Freedom Summer,” a drive to register African American voters in the Deep South, especially Mississippi.



The Council of Federated Organizations had organized the Mississippi Summer Project or Freedom Summer. The Council of Federated Organizations was a coalition of four established civil rights organizations: the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP), the Congress of Racial Equality (CORE), the Southern Christian Leadership Conference (SCLC), and the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee (SNCC), with SNCC playing the leading role.

Over 1,000 out- of- state volunteers worked alongside thousands of black Mississippians during Freedom Summer. Most of the out- of- state volunteers were young, most of them from the North, and most were white and many were Jewish. Organizers focused on Mississippi because in 1962, only 6.7 percent of eligible black voters were registered.

White officials in the South systematically kept African Americans from voting by charging poll taxes, administering difficult literacy tests, complicating applications, harassing potential voters, and intimidating them with arson, battery, and lynching.



Many white Mississippians deeply resented the outsiders and their attempts to change their society. State and local governments, police, the White Citizens' Council and the Ku Klux Klan used murder, arrests, beatings, arson, spying, firing, evictions, and other means of intimidation and harassment to oppose the project and prevent blacks from registering to vote.

Over the life of the ten week Freedom Summer Voter Registration project:

- Four civil rights workers were killed
- Four people were critically wounded
- Eighty Freedom Summer workers were beaten
- One thousand people, both volunteers and locals, were arrested
- Thirty seven churches were bombed or burned
- Thirty Black homes or businesses were bombed or burned.
- The lives of New Yorkers like Carolyn Goodman and Mississippians like Buford Posey were changed forever.



The small town of Philadelphia, Mississippi nestles in the hills of Neshoba County, about thirty miles northeast of Jackson. Some of the population of about 6,000 sympathized with the drive to register black voters. Others, especially Klan members, were determined to stop them at all costs- even murder.

Michael “Mickey” Schwerner, a 24-year-old from Brooklyn, New York, and 21-year-old James Chaney from Meridian, Mississippi were working in and around Neshoba County registering blacks to vote, opening “Freedom Schools” and organizing black boycotts of white owned businesses in Meridian. Mickey’s wife, Rita, conducted a Freedom School for black pupils who were anxious to learn and were not welcome in white schools.





A CORE volunteer registering  
Mississippians to vote.



The actions of civil rights workers like Chaney and Schwerner enraged the area Klu Klux Klan and they plotted to get rid of Michael Schwerner whom they called "Goatee" and "Jew Boy." In May 1964 the Lauderdale and Neshoba KKK members received word from Klan Imperial Wizard Sam Bowers that Plan 4 was activated. Plan 4 called for eliminating Schwerner.

The Klan discovered that Schwerner had scheduled a meeting for the evening of June 16 with the members of Mount Zion Church in Longdale, Mississippi. The church was to be used for one of the many Freedom Schools that were opening across Mississippi. Members of the church held a business meeting that evening and as ten of them left the church around 10 p.m. they came face to face with over thirty klansmen lined up with shotguns.

The Klan was really looking for Schwerner, but he was in Oxford, Ohio. In retaliation, the Klansmen beat the church members and burned the wood framed church to the ground. Schwerner heard about the fire and he, James Chaney, and Andrew Goodman, who were all attending a three day CORE seminar in Oxford, decided to return to Longdale to investigate the church burning.







Andrew Goodman (in dark shirt and pants) at the CORE seminar.

Freedom summer volunteers.



The three young men headed south in a blue Ford station wagon that CORE owned. Schwerner especially knew the danger that they faced. After an over night stop in Meridian, they headed straight for Neshoba County to inspect the burned out church and meet with some of the members who had been beaten. During their visits they heard that the KKK had targeted Schwerner, and some local white men were trying to find him.

Andrew Goodman, 20, sent this postcard home on June 21, 1964 – the last day of his life.

Dear Mom and Dad,

I have arrived safely in Meridian, Miss. This is a wonderful town and the weather is fine. I wish you were here. The people in this city are wonderful, and our reception was very good. All my love, Andy.



At 3 p.m. the conspicuous blue CORE wagon headed back to Meridian. Deciding that Highway 16 was a safer route, the three civil rights workers took that road and headed west through Philadelphia back to Meridian. A few miles outside of Philadelphia Deputy Sheriff and Klan member Cecil Price, spotted the CORE station wagon traveling down the highway.

Price knew the driver, James Chaney. Both he and his fellow Klan members hated Chaney who had been born and raised in Mississippi and grew up to be a black activist. Price pulled the CORE Ford station wagon over and arrested and jailed the three students under suspicion of arson in the Mount Zion Church fire.

At her post at the CORE office in Meridian, Sue Brown began to worry as the hours crept by and the three workers didn't return. Schwerner had told her that if they weren't back by 4:30, then they were in trouble. She and other CORE workers called the Neshoba County jail asking the police for information about the three civil rights workers. Jailer Minnie Herring denied any knowledge of them. The three young men were never seen alive again.



By June 23, 1964, FBI agent John proctor and a team of ten agents were in Neshoba County investigating the disappearance of the three civil rights workers. President Lyndon B. Johnson pressured J. Edgar Hoover to solve the case. The FBI opened its first office in Mississippi and the military bused sailors into Neshoba County to help search for the missing men. The case became known as MIBURN, for Mississippi Burning, and top FBI inspectors arrived to help with the investigation.

With the help of local people and Klan informants who were there the night of the murders, the FBI reconstructed the murders of Andrew Goodman, Mickey Schwerner, and James Chaney.

After they were locked up in the Neshoba County jail, Schwerner asked to make a telephone call, but the Cecil Price would not allow him to call anyone. Instead, Price made some calls. He called Klansman Edgar Ray Killen and told him that he had captured Schwerner. Killen in turn called Neshoba and Lauderdale county Klansmen and organized a group for what they called some “butt ripping.”

Klan members met and decided that some of the younger members would actually kill the three civil rights workers. Killen told the younger Klan members to buy rubber gloves. Everyone met at 8:15 and reviewed the killing plan. Then they drove by the jail where the three workers were imprisoned.

Around 10 p.m., Deputy Price freed the three civil rights workers and followed them as they drove down Highway 19. Price chased the CORE station wagon at high speed, and Chaney the driver, soon stopped the car. The three men surrendered to Deputy Price.



Price put his prisoners in the patrol car and drove them down a dirt road called Rock Cut Road. Two cars of young Klan members followed the patrol car.

After Price pulled the three civil rights workers from the car, Wayne Roberts, a 26 year old, shot Schwerner, then Goodman, then Chaney. Informant James Jordan told the FBI that Doyle Barnette also shot Chaney twice.

The men took the bodies to a 253-acre farm that had a dam site, owned by Olen Burrage. They put the bodies together in a hollow and covered them with dirt.

At 12:30, Price and Klan member,  
Neshoba County Sheriff Rainey had a  
meeting. No one knows the details of  
that meeting.

Buford Posey knew how the Civil rights workers died. He came from a prominent Mississippi family and had been active in the civil rights movement in the early 1960s. He often said that he was the first white person in Mississippi to join the NAACP. He said that the murders took place on a Sunday night, June 21, 1964 on Rock Cut Road, right off Highway 19. Posey said that late that night, around 2 o'clock, the telephone rang. He immediately recognized the voice. The caller was Edgar Ray Killen, the "chaplain" of the White Knights of the Ku Klux Klan. "We took care of your three friends tonight and you're next," Killen told Posey.



The week before that, Posey had made a trip to Meridian and warned Schwerner to be careful. "The Klan has sentenced you to death. You know the sheriffs up there, Lawrence Rainey and Cecil Ray Price are Klan members," Posey told Schwerner.

The morning after Killen called him, Buford Posey called the FBI in Jackson and then in New Orleans. He told them he was a civil rights worker for the NAACP and that he thought the preacher and the sheriff's office were involved in the murder.

Shortly after Schwerner, Chaney, and Goodman “disappeared,” Buford Posey fled to the Highlander Center near Knoxville, Tennessee. Here he would discover information that pinpointed the location of the bodies of the civil rights workers and the identifies of the murderers. The information came from Ernest Moore, a World War II veteran with a drinking problem. Posey said that Ernest was a good man who had never sobered up after the war. He live with his widowed mother near the dam site where the bodies were eventually found. One night Ernest was drinking and his mother wouldn't let him in the house.

Ernest went down near the dam and laid under a tree and fell asleep. Early in the morning he woke up because he thought he heard Ray Killen's voice preaching a funeral. According to Moore, the preacher was asking the Lord to forgive Schwerner, Chaney and Goodman for being Jews and Communists, agitators and things like that. Moore thought he was dreaming, but he walked several miles back to town and fell asleep in front of a dry cleaners that a friend of Posey's owned. The friend told Posey the exact location of the bodies.



Searching for the bodies of the three civil rights workers.



On August 4, 1964, the FBI received information from Klan member James Jordan, about the location of the bodies. They were uncovered at the dam site at the Old Jolly Farm.

Neshoba County Sheriff  
Lawrence Rainey.





Carolyn  
Goodman,  
Fannie Lou  
Chaney and the  
sister of Mickey  
Schwerner.



By December 1964, FBI informant James Jordan also gave the FBI enough information to enable them to arrest 19 men in Neshoba and Lauderdale Counties for conspiring to deprive Schwerner, Chaney, and Goodman of their civil rights under the color of the state law. Within a week of the arrest of the 19 men, the U.S. Commissioner dismissed the charges, ruling that Jordan's confession leading to the arrests was hearsay. A federal grand jury in Jackson, Mississippi, upheld the indictments against the 19 men.

Then on February 24, 1965, Federal Judge William Harold Cox, a well known segregationist, ruled that only Rainey and Price acted “under the color of state law” and threw out the other 17 indictments. Finally in March 1966, the United States Supreme Court overruled Cox and reinstated 18 of the 19 original indictments.



The trial began on October 7, 1967 in Meridian, Mississippi with Judge Cox presiding. The jury was all white, with one member an admitted ex-klansman. Three Klan informants, Wallace Miller, Delmar Dennis, and James Jordan, gave incriminating testimony about the details leading up to the murders and of the murders themselves. The defense consisted of character witnesses, relatives, and neighbors, testifying in support of the accused alibis. On October 20, 1967, the jury delivered its verdict. Out of the 18 defendants, seven were found guilty and eight not guilty.

Those found guilty included Deputy Sheriff Cecil Price, Imperial Wizard Sam Bowers, Wayne Roberts, Jimmy Snowden, Billy Posey, and Horace Barnett. Rainey and Olen Burrage, the owner of the property where the bodies were uncovered, were acquitted. The jury could not reach a verdict in the case of Edgar Ray Killen.

On December 29, 1967, Judge Cox sentenced Price and Posey to six years, Roberts and Bowers to ten years and all of the others received four years. Judge Cox said later, "They killed one nigger, one Jew, and a white man...I gave them all what I thought they deserved."

Price was back home after serving four years and died in May 2001 from a work related accident. In 2005, after students in Illinois working on a History Day project uncovered new evidence and Civil rights workers marched in Philadelphia, Mississippi, Ku Klux Klan member and preacher Edgar Ray Killen now 79 years old, was charged with murder. On June 13 2005, jury selection began, forty years after the three civil rights workers were murdered. Killian was found guilty of manslaughter and sentenced to sixty consecutive years in prison.



The Freedom Summer didn't register many voters, but it and the murder of the three civil rights workers had a significant effect on the Civil Rights Movement. The events of the Freedom Summer :

- Led to the passage of the 1964 Civil Rights Act
- Helped break down the decades of isolation and repression that were the foundation of the Jim Crow System.
- Put into sharp relief the disparity between the value that that people placed on the lives of whites and blacks.

The volunteers in the Freedom Summer Movement-  
black and white- still consider it one of the defining  
moments of their lives.

Heather Booth, Marshall Ganz, and Mario Savio were notable veterans of the Freedom Summer. Heather Booth returned to Illinois and became a founder of the Chicago Women's Liberation Union and later the Midwest Academy. Marshall Ganz returned to California and worked for many years on the staff of the United Farm Workers. He later taught organizing strategies and in 2008 played a crucial role in organizing Barak Obama's field staff for the campaign. Mario Savio returned to the University of California, Berkeley, where he led the Free Speech Movement.



Andrew Goodman's mother, Carolyn, continued to honor his memory by continued activism in civil rights causes. In the late 1960s the Goodman family helped the mother of James Chaney relocate to New Jersey. Fannie Lou Chaney did not want to live in Mississippi after her son was killed and her husband deserted her.



Rita Schwerner Bender  
hears the Killen verdict

Rita the widow of Michael Schwerner stayed in Mississippi after the murders and continued to work for civil rights in the south. She attended the Killian trial and said of the verdict: “I hope that this conviction helps to shed some light on happened in this state. Yet, there is something else that needs to be said. The fact that some members of that jury could have sat through that testimony and could not bring themselves to acknowledge that these were murders, committed with malice, indicates that there are still people, unfortunately among you, who choose to look aside and choose to not see the truth. And that means that there’s still a lot more to be done.”

Memorial  
Window  
Civil Rights  
Workers  
Cornell  
University  
Ithaca, New  
York

