



Free At Last

A HISTORY OF THE CIVIL RIGHTS MOVEMENT
AND THOSE WHO DIED IN THE STRUGGLE

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*Had best we forget
Many Christmas
Days Steens
"1989"*

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A HISTORY OF THE CIVIL RIGHTS MOVEMENT
AND THOSE WHO DIED IN THE STRUGGLE

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Preface

*One day the South
will recognize its
real heroes.*

—Martin Luther King Jr., in
"Letter From Birmingham City Jail"

In Montgomery, Alabama, in 1989, a memorial was built to commemorate the achievements of the civil rights era and to honor those who died during that struggle. A few of the victims were well known — Medgar Evers, Martin Luther King Jr. — but there were many whose names you could not find in the history books: John Earl Reese, Willie Edwards, Clarence Triggs.

Along with a history of the civil rights movement, the stories of those who died are told here. Their lives serve as examples of the many personal tragedies suffered for a movement that transformed America from a society in which blacks were routinely excluded from full citizenship into one that now recognizes, if it has not entirely realized, the equal rights of all citizens.

Although civil rights activity has been a potent force in American political life since the Abolitionists battled slavery and continues in many forms today, the civil rights movement which overturned segregation in the South during the 1950s and 1960s was a unique phenomenon — characterized by nonviolent resistance and fueled by an enormous

groundswell of support from ordinary people who had never before been politically involved.

The actions of politicians and judges helped speed the transformation that occurred during those 14 years. But it was the courage of people like Wharlest Jackson who lost their lives in the struggle that made that transformation inevitable.

Some of these martyrs were not killed because of anything they personally did, but because they represented, by their color, the movement that was threatening the segregationists' way of life. Lemuel Penn, driving through Georgia on his way home from Army reserve training; Willie Brewster, a foundry worker driving home from work; Virgil Ware, a boy on a bicycle — all were killed by members of large Klan and neo-Nazi organizations whose members thought terrorizing blacks would halt civil rights efforts.

But terrorism did not break the movement. Time after time, inhuman acts of violence only strengthened the dedication of those whose lives were bound to the struggle. When Emmett Till and Mack Parker were lynched in

Mississippi, when four girls died in a Birmingham church explosion, people all over the world paid attention to the movement that was changing America, and the national will for reform grew.

Those whose deaths spurred the movement on, those who were killed by organized white terrorists trying to "set an example," and those who were murdered for their own acts of courage — these are the heroes of the civil rights struggle who are profiled in the following pages.

But they are not the only victims of the era. There are countless others who can only be characterized as victims of random, senseless racism — racism so perverse it allowed whites to murder blacks for little or no reason:

- Clinton Melton, a Sumner, Mississippi, service station worker, was killed in 1955 by a white man who objected to the price of his gasoline.

- L.C. Baldwin, a 79-year-old minister, was leading a cow along a roadside in Huntsville, Alabama, in the spring of 1956 when a young white man threw a 10-pound stone from a passing car "as a prank," killing Baldwin.

- Maybelle Mahone, a 30-year-old mother of six, was shot and killed by a white man at her home in Zebulon, Georgia, in 1956 because she "sassed" him.

- Frank Morris, a 51-year-old shoe repairman and radio host, was fatally burned when white men bombed his shop in Ferriday, Louisiana, on December 10, 1964.

Similar acts of racist violence have victimized blacks throughout history, and they have not ended. In 1981, a black man was randomly selected and lynched by the Klan in Mobile, Alabama. In 1988, neo-Nazi Skinheads murdered an Ethiopian man in Portland, Oregon, simply because he was black.

The research for the Civil Rights Memorial was conducted over a one-year period and included detailed searches through newspapers, state archives, Library of Congress holdings, and papers of civil rights organizations, as well as numerous personal interviews and hundreds of letters soliciting information.

From time to time during that research, a glimpse of a story kept appearing, in various forms, of the death of an

unidentified teen-age boy whose body was found in September 1964 in the Big Black River near Canton, Mississippi. Several books noted his death in passing because he was found wearing a Congress of Racial Equality T-shirt, and other documents listed his death as the last in a long summer of violence in Mississippi. But nothing else was known about him, and it seemed his name had been forgotten.

After months of reading documents, a researcher scanning microfilm at the Library of Congress found a memo that noted the discovery of a body — a 14-year-old boy, wearing a CORE T-shirt, found in the Big Black River. His name was Herbert Oarsby.

The full story of Herbert Oarsby's death, and of racist violence in the civil rights era, may never be known. There were many deaths never investigated, many killers never identified, and many victims whose names have been lost.

This book is dedicated to the memory of Herbert Oarsby and the unknown martyrs of the civil rights movement.

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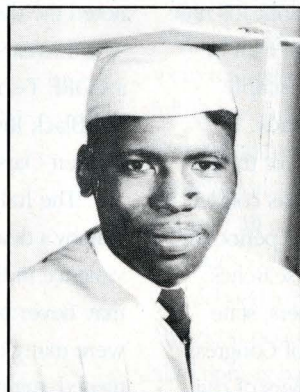
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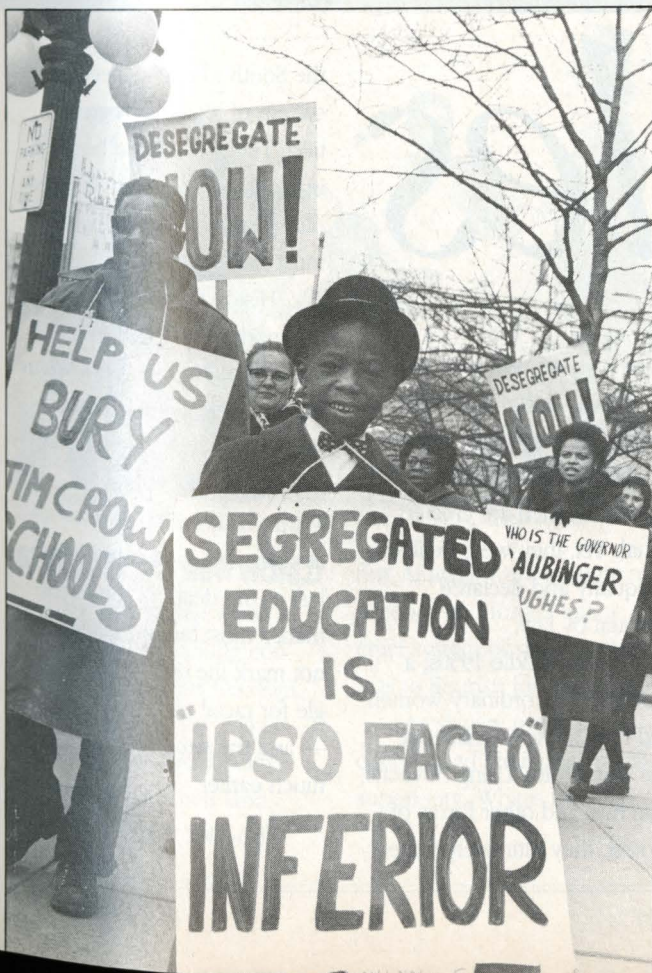


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