INVESTIGATING CIVIL RIGHTS ERA CRIMES: THE ROLE OF THE PRESS

David Ridgen and Thomas Moore’s work shows you what can happen when people get committed to justice. I got involved in looking at these unpunished cases in 1989. I saw a movie, *Mississippi Burning*, not a good movie in terms of truth. I happened to see it with some other people. I was only five in 1964, and I grew up in a white conservative Christian home in East Texas. That movie was the beginning of my education. I thought, “Why weren’t these guys ever prosecuted for murder?”

I became interested in this case, and a month later in investigating the Mississippi Sovereignty Commission—a state segregationist spy agency—I found out the records were sealed. If someone tells me I can’t have something, I want it worse. I developed sources who leaked me documents. At this same time, the Commission was trying to get Beckwith acquitted. Eventually, with the help of the transcripts that Myrlie Evers found, Beckwith was indicted. Six months before, I had interviewed him. He wouldn’t talk to African American journalists, and he asked me questions before I could see him: I had to be white, churchgoing, etc. I could have refused to answer, but I knew he would love my answers.

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1 Jerry Mitchell is an investigative reporter for *The Clarion-Ledger* in Jackson, Mississippi. His stories have helped put four Klansmen behind bars, including the killers of NAACP leaders Medgar Evers and Vernon Dahmer, four girls in a Birmingham church, and three civil rights workers in Mississippi. In 2006, his work exonerated Clyde Kennard, an African American falsely imprisoned in 1960 after he tried to enroll at an all-white university. A winner of more than 20 national awards, he was a Pulitzer finalist in 2006 for beat reporting.
In 1990, I interviewed him. It was getting dark, and he lived near Chattanooga. It’s a beautiful place, but not if you are standing next to Beckwith! He wanted to walk me to car! He said, “If you write good things about white Christians, God will reward you. If you write bad things, God will punish you.” His wife had made me a sandwich. You can imagine what I did with that! Later he said of me, “When he dies, he’s going to Africa.”

The Dahmer case was also one that I worked on. They firebombed Vernon Dahmer’s house, and he grabbed his shotgun so his family could escape. But fire seared his lungs and he died later that day. A few weeks later, Vernon Dahmer’s Voter Registration Card came in the mail. He never got a chance to cast the ballot himself. The guy who ordered it was in the White Knights, the most violent Klan in US—responsible for at least ten killings that we know of.

Families are key to bringing these cases. There has to be a will to pursue. The District Attorney said he’d look at the Dahmer case, but it went on and on, and he didn’t do it. By 1996, it looked like nothing would happen. I was in Ohio when I got a call from this guy who was a recovering gambling addict. As a kid, he had been an errand boy for Sam Bowers, and he overheard the orders to kill Dahmer. The case got reopened in 1997, and one of the key witnesses was Billy Roy Pitts, who had dropped his gun and was caught. He had testified, and pleaded guilty but never served his sentence. No one knew where he was these days. I got on switchboard.com, typed in his name, and up it popped. The first twenty minutes of our conversation was, “How did you find me? I have an unlisted phone number!”
The authorities issued a warrant for Pitts’ arrest. While he was on the run, I got a cassette tape in the mail, and played it: “Jerry, I just thought I’d let you know, you have ruined my life!” But here’s this tape.” He told me about his involvement in killing Dahmer and other cases. This led to arrest of Sam Bowers. His family brought him to court in a wheelchair with oxygen, and he said, “I can’t take more than a couple of steps without oxygen.” So the judge let him out without bond. Later we caught him on a golf course, and we had “before” and “after” photos. He got arrested.

Bowers was represented by Travis Buckley, who was a lawyer for the Klan in the 1960s. If you were their lawyer, you got a free membership in the Klan. Travis was cross-examining Pitts about the planning meeting. He asked Pitts, “Who was at the planning meeting?” Pitts replied, “[X] was there, [Y] was there, and you were there!” Well, that was the first time I had ever seen a witness implicate the defense lawyer! Bowers was convicted.

The next case I was involved with was the Birmingham Sixteenth St. Baptist Church case. I recommend Spike Lee’s documentary on the case. I talked to Cherry several times. Then I got a letter from his wife that said, “Bobby wants to talk to you.” I drove to Texas to talk to him, and took them out for barbecue. We talked for six hours, and he insisted on his innocence. “I left that sign shop to get home and watch wrestling,” he insisted. I asked Susan to check and see what was on TV that night. But there was no wrestling that night, or for years! Really stupid! Cherry got arrested in that case.

Not too long after, I heard that Cherry had something to do with the beating of Fred Shuttlesworth, a brave civil rights activist who tried to enroll his kids in school in Birmingham. He got a concussion. I get books in the mail, including one with a big
biography on Fred Shuttlesworth. There was a picture of the beating! I got footage from a CBS documentary. I asked Cherry’s son to look at it. “Yup there’s dad. See him reaching in his front pocket, that’s where he keeps his brass knuckles.” So it was not surprising that the FBI used the TV logs and footage and that there was no wrestling on TV that night.

The Mississippi Burning case. That should have been done in 1989, but remember what I said happens if someone tells me I can’t have something? Sam Bowers had done an interview in a sealed archive. I got someone to leak it to me. He was convicted, but most of the accused walked. He said he was delighted to see Preacher Killen walk about a free man. I called up Killen, and he said, “There is some guy in Jackson who keeps stirring things up.” I didn’t have the heart to tell him it was me! I took him out for catfish. He denied he had anything to do with the killings. I asked him, "What should happen to the killers?" He said, “I’m not going to say they are wrong.”

When Martin Luther King was killed, two agents showed up on Killen’s doorstep and he wouldn’t talk. But they left their card. He said, “Man I want to shake the hand of the man who did it.” That reveals the mentality of some of these guys!

Many of us have been asked, “Why don’t you leave these old guys alone?” “Oh Jerry,” they tell me, “Leave these old guys alone.” But these guys were young killers who just happened to get old. That’s the way I feel about it. The Dee and Moore case is horrific. Picked up these kids because they heard some wild rumor about gun running and they beat and beat and beat them. Put their bodies in a truck, weighted them and threw them in the river, where they drowned. I don’t have any sympathy for someone who is involved in that. These cases have come about because of brave families, brave
investigators and prosecutors. These cases take more energy than any other kind of case. The media has played a role and I am pleased I have been a small part of that.

The Department of Justice has 127 names now, and here were others killed whose names they don’t even have. Families have called me and said, “My grandfather was killed.” We can’t prosecute these cases, but we need to make a record. Their lives mean something, and we need to remember that.

Thank you.