

Voting Rights Organizer Targeted by the Ku Klux Klan for Liquidation Prompting the Black Power Movement

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A staunch activist within the NAACP and a close friend of Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee (SNCC), Vernon F. Dahmer, Sr., was killed on January 10, 1966 in a Ku Klux Klan terrorist raid on his home at Kelley Settlement in Hattiesburg, Mississippi.

The Dahmer family had received numerous threats during the period leading up to his death. He and his wife Ellie took turns sleeping in order to guard the home but apparently this was not enough to ward off the attacks that were launched by the Klan that fateful morning at 2:00 a.m. when his small grocery store and home was invaded and firebombed.

As early as the 1950s, Dahmer and other activists including Medgar Evers were victimized for establishing a NAACP Youth Chapter in Hattiesburg. The website [onevotesncc.org](#) noted that this was a bold move by the organizers, "However, when its young president, Clyde Kennard, tried to enroll at a segregated college, he was framed for a petty crime and sentenced to seven years in prison. When Kennard became seriously ill, his jailers refused to give him medical treatment. He died not long afterwards."



Nonetheless, Dahmer continued to struggle for Civil Rights serving as president of the NAACP in Hattiesburg at a time when such a public stance was tantamount to making oneself a target of the Ku Klux Klan and the White Citizen's Council. He was a proponent of universal voting rights and pledged his life to eliminating obstacles to full access for African Americans to the franchise.

A Role Model for Youth

Joyce Ladner, a former SNCC organizer, was mentored by Dahmer during her early years when he would take her to political activities and demonstrations against legalized segregation.

During the late 1950s when Ladner was a teenager she learned first-hand about the dangers of Civil Rights activism when the NAACP was outlawed in Mississippi and some other southern states. In 1956 a number of southern states initiated legal actions against the NAACP saying their existence defied state statutes.

State governments in the south took a variety of actions against the Civil Rights organization by demanding their membership lists and financial records. If these documents were turned over to these authorities, whom many were functionaries of the Ku Klux Klan and the White Citizen's Council, the members and contributors to the NAACP would have been subjected to physical and economic retaliation by white ruling class interests.

Defiantly the NAACP state structures refused to hand over membership rolls and consequently they were levied huge fines and threatened with possible imprisonment. The aim of these actions were to force the organization out of existence in the immediate aftermath of the growing influence of the African American struggle as exemplified in the Montgomery Bus Boycott and the mass response to the lynching of 14-year-old Emmett Till of Chicago, who was killed in Money, Mississippi in August of 1955.

The NAACP fought these attacks all the way to the U.S. Supreme Court which ruled in its favor in 1958 in a landmark case, NAACP v. Alabama, which stated that the suppression of this organization through demanding its membership records was a violation of freedom of association as guaranteed by the Constitution. Several other cases brought by southern state NAACP chapters also gained favorable rulings. However, the attacks against this organization and others continued well into the 1960s.

Ladner wrote in a recent article commemorating the 50th anniversary of the martyrdom of Dahmer that "In his short fifty-eight years, Dahmer launched voter registration drives, and adhered to the philosophy that it was his responsibility to be his brother and sister's keeper. Perhaps it was also his economic independence that made him a target for the Ku Klux Klan." (teachingforchange.org)

This former activist and sociologist also said of Dahmer, "He annexed large tracts of land, built a commercial farm of cotton, owned a saw mill, a planer mill, and a grocery store. He hired his Black neighbors from Kelley Settlement to work for him, thereby carrying out his philosophy of being a good neighbor. This was largely unheard of in the fifties and sixties because very few Black people owned businesses. The jobs he provided reduced Black flight to northern cities and strengthened the local community. Vernon Dahmer was a generous man who believed in the power of a united community. He was also a leader in the Shady

Grove Baptist Church as leader of the choir and Sunday school Superintendent.”

Dahmer Targeted by the Klan for Liquidation

The Dahmer home, store and farm was attacked and firebombed at the aegis of one of the most notorious KKK Grand Wizards of the period Sam Bowers. Consumed with a virulent hatred of African Americans, Bowers, like the early founders of the Klan during the late 1860s, came from an affluent family background whose members were involved in business and politics.

In an article published by the New York Times after Bowers’ death in 2006 described him as a “charismatic leader of the most violent and secretive division of the Ku Klux Klan, the Mississippi White Knights, which at its peak had up to 10,000 members by law enforcement estimates. The F.B.I. attributed nine murders and 300 beatings, burnings and bombings to Mr. Bowers and the group..... On Feb. 15, 1964, he coaxed 200 Klansmen assembled at Brookhaven, Miss., to join him in the founding of the Mississippi White Knights of the Ku Klux Klan, an organization that defined itself in its unhesitating willingness to use violence.” (Nov. 6)

There were four attempts to prosecute Bowers for the murder but it took until 1991 for a conviction to be won. The persistence of the widow and children of Dahmer kept the case in front of the authorities in Mississippi.

This same NYT article said of the murder of Dahmer during the early morning hours of January 10, 1966, that “Mr. Bowers sent two carloads of Klansmen with 12 gallons of gasoline, white hoods, and shotguns to the Dahmer house near Hattiesburg, Miss., on a cold January night. The burning gasoline was tossed into the house; Mr. Dahmer, whose lungs were seared, held attackers at bay so his family could escape, then died later in the arms of his wife.”

Bowers died in a Mississippi prison in 1996 at the age of 82. Despite his and other Klan leaders’ demise, racist violence remains a stark reality in the U.S. well into the 21st century.

Racist killings, such as that of Dahmer’s, inspired SNCC leaders and others to adopt Black Power and militant self-defense as a political strategy in 1966. Some five decades later there is a resurgence of anti-racist demonstrations and urban rebellions.

Similarly in 2016, there is still strong resistance by law-enforcement organizations, prosecutorial agencies as well as local, state and federal courts to pursue criminal cases against those who commit acts of racist violence against African Americans and other oppressed peoples. Just as there was never a federal anti-lynching law passed by the U.S. Congress after numerous attempts during the early decades of the 20th century when mob violence against African Americans was routine resulting in thousands of deaths and injuries, neither the House of Representatives or the Senate of today has taken any legislative actions aimed at ending the blatant state repression against people of color communities.

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