

Mississippi Autopsy

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THE PHONE RANG about 1:30 a.m. I had just gone to sleep, after a restless hour in bed conjugating four days of utter failure to get my outboard motor running, and I walked half-asleep down the dark hallway to the telephone, certain that it was a wrong number. The phone doesn't ring too often at our summer home on Martha's Vineyard Island, and I was as surprised by the post-midnight call as I would have been if I looked out the window and saw my ailing outboard motor running around by itself in the bay.

The operator said Jackson, Mississippi, was calling.

The man on the wire was Dr. Charles Goodrich, a New York physician who was spending his vacation in Mississippi giving medical aid to civil rights workers as a volunteer for the Medical Committee for Human Rights.

"Dave, can you get down here, right away?"

"To Mississippi?"

"Immediately. The autopsy for those three kids is scheduled for tomorrow, and the attorneys for Mrs. Chaney and Mickey Schwerner's family want an expert pathologist at the examination as an independent observer."

I had been horrified by the newspaper accounts of the discovery of the bodies of the three young civil rights workers. I would do anything I could to help. Goodrich said he had verbal permission for me to observe the autopsy. People in New York were working on a way to get me from the little island off the coast of Massachusetts to Mississippi by lunchtime. "You find a way to get me there, and I'll go," I said.

Then I went back to bed and waited.

AT 3 A.M., THE PHONE RANG again. There is a small airport on Martha's Vineyard Island. I was to be there at 7 a.m. A special plane would take me to Kennedy International, where I could catch a 9:15 a.m. flight to Mississippi that would get me into Jackson fifteen minutes before the autopsy was scheduled to begin.

When I went back to sleep this time, I had forgotten about my outboard motor.

It was still dark when we got up and my wife drove me to the airstrip. But there was no small plane. Instead, we got a phone call from the pilot. He couldn't get *his* motor started. I told him I knew just how he felt, and put in a call to Jackson

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to tell Goodrich that things looked pretty hopeless. The only scheduled flight from the island into Kennedy was at 10 a.m., too late to make the morning plane to Mississippi, and the next flight for Jackson left at 4 in the afternoon from Newark Airport.

As I waited in the telephone booth for the operator to get through, my feelings were mixed. I was relieved at not having to interrupt my vacation, and I hadn't particularly looked forward to the reception an alien white man can get in Mississippi. But I was disappointed, too, because I wouldn't have a chance now to do something that might help find the murderers of those kids. Goodrich, when he came on the phone, resolved my ambivalent feelings for me.

"Get down here anyway. Take the late plane. There's something funny going on about this business. I think we may be able to arrange for you to examine the bodies later. It may all be a wild goose chase, but let's try."

I said goodbye, and then told my wife that I was going to Mississippi, after all.

I HAD EIGHT MINUTES to spare at Kennedy airport before catching a helicopter to Newark, so I talked a barber into giving me perhaps what is the fastest haircut on the books. I saw myself in the barber shop mirror, and cried a little. My vacation wardrobe at Martha's Vineyard Island consisted of an eclectic assortment of well-broken-in loafing clothes, and I had dressed for my mission to Mississippi in battered sun tans, a sport shirt, and a faded blue denim sailing jacket. In a burst of insecurity, I had the bootblack shine my shoes. On the way out I bought a white shirt and tie and put them on, which provided a dapper foil to my dirty tans and denim jacket. I could guess what proper Mississippians would think of the 'Medical Examiner from the East.'

The Newark plane left on time, and I had just unfastened my seatbelt when I heard a man across the aisle tell the stewardess to let him know if "she ran across anybody named Spain." I answered up, and he introduced himself as Dr. Aron Wells, who is the chairman of the Medical Committee on Human Rights. He was traveling, by coincidence, on the same plane and had heard from Dr. Goodrich that I might be aboard. I moved across the aisle so we could chat and we soon became good friends. Dr. Wells, an assistant professor of medicine at Cornell, was one of the organizers of the

medical committee, which was set up on an emergency basis when physical violence became standard operating procedure against civil rights workers in Mississippi. The committee sent over 100 doctors and nurses to work in the South this summer, and is now a permanent volunteer organization. The committee, Wells said, is now expanding its operations beyond medical care to areas including a study of the effect of discrimination on the health of Southern Negroes, investigation of cases where federal funds might be used in segregated medical facilities, and surveying the public health problems of Negroes—something largely neglected in the South.

The plane made a scheduled stop at Birmingham, and the stewardess soon came down the aisle and told us that one of the engines wouldn't turn over for the takeoff and there would be an indefinite delay. I told her to tell the pilot that I knew just how he felt, and Dr. Wells and I went out for dinner.

The restaurant in the Birmingham airport is modern and attractive in an eleemosynary fashion and I suggested we try it. Dr. Wells hesitated. "Do you think it's wise?" he said. "Do you think it will be ok?"

Dr. Wells is a Negro.

I found myself embarrassed at his embarrassment, and I said that airports were now legally desegregated so I didn't think there'd be any trouble. Our uneasiness ebbed away after a couple of drinks and a good dinner. The waitress, who spoke in a syrupy Southern drawl, was extremely gracious and attentive and as we got back onto the plane I began to wonder if my preconceptions about the South might be a lot worse than the reality. It didn't take long in Jackson to find out that they weren't.

IT WAS DARK when we landed at the Jackson airport. I suggested that we take a cab to the hotel, but Dr. Wells said, very quietly, "No, I don't think we'd better." I looked at him and I saw in the pain and fear and dignity in his eyes what he meant without him saying anything further: After dark in Mississippi, it is poison for a Negro and a white to be seen on the streets together. It is doubtful that there was a cab driver in the city who would have dared to pick us up. Dr. Wells called the medical committee headquarters, and a car was sent out for us.

We were driven to the Sun and Sands, a modern, glass front hotel with a central patio and pool; it is desegregated and a frequent stopping place for representatives of civil rights organizations.

I got my first hate stare in the lobby. The stare is an almost instinctive reaction of Mississippians who see a white man, especially a "foreign" white man, with a Negro. My felony was compounded because I asked for a room with one. Dr. Wells had planned to spend that night with a local Negro minister, but when we got into town after dark I suggested that he stay with me. When I told the girl behind the desk I wanted a room for two her head snapped back as if I had jabbed the ball point registration pen into her stomach.

"You *two*?" she asked. Her voice was a tempered mixture of incredulity and disgust.

I finished filling out the registration card. Her hand hit the page for the bellboy as if the metal bell were a slug she was trying to brush away.

The first thing Dr. Wells said after the bellboy left the room was "What do you think is the best thing to do if somebody throws a bomb in the room." He said it very seriously, and it took me a few seconds to realize that he wasn't kidding. "Do you think we should run, or try to throw the thing out before it goes off? I've been thinking about this for some time," he said. I said that I had no experience with something like that, but that I imagined it would be best to run into the next room. As I answered him, I found myself wondering at the sound of my own words—wondering what kind of a never-world we were in that we were seriously discussing bombs.

Dr. Goodrich called, and asked us to come down to the room of John Pratt, and upstate New York attorney who was representing the Lawyer's Constitutional Defense Committee in Jackson. Pratt was handling the arrangements for the autopsy. I wasn't prepared for the scene in Pratt's room.

WHEN THE DOOR SHUT, I thought I was inside the headquarters of a battle battalion. Pratt's small room seemed filled with people—I counted at least ten—all moving and talking at the same frantic pace. One young man was in a serious phone conversation, another was pacing the floor, several others were studying documents that looked like legal briefs and some others picked in lackluster fashion at food that had apparently just been brought in. Three men suddenly rushed out the front door, and it had barely closed when two other men and a girl came in. Pratt was in the middle of all this consternation, a tall, wirey man in his early 30's, talking, laughing occasionally, issuing instructions and occasionally taking a bite out of a cold baked potato sitting solitaire in a plate on top of the bureau.

The girl walked up to me. She was pretty, barely

into her 20's, and looked like she might have been out cheering the Beatles the night before. There was no smile on her face, and her voice was even and emotionless.

"Here is your orientation packet, Dr. Spain."

She handed me a large manila envelope. That is given to all volunteers who come into Mississippi. I read the papers inside with a growing sense of uneasiness. An "orientation sheet" listed typical problems civil rights volunteers encountered in Mississippi and suggestions to avoid them. One page was a memorandum of various psychological problems that some civil rights workers faced—like the need of some white to mentally "become a Negro" before they could adjust to working there, or the tensions and misunderstandings that at times developed between white men and Negro women, and vice versa, who worked together.

There was also a list titled "Security Regulations." I was to always let committee people know where I was going, was not to be out on the streets alone at night, and should report my whereabouts to headquarters every three hours when I was away from the hotel.

The girl gave me a list of phone numbers to call if I was arrested ("You might be arrested at any time that you're on the streets") and asked me for a friend they could call if I had to make bail.

Then, for the first time, I felt the full shock of the monstrous implications of what was happening in Mississippi. Up until this time, I was thinking of the trip, though made under extraordinary circumstances, as just another assignment. Suddenly, I had an entirely different perspective. It was hard to rationalize the possibility that I could be arrested, that I might be in physical danger—just because I was in Mississippi. It was like being in the middle of a war game—only the other side was shooting real bullets.

PRATT BRIEFED ME ON THE SITUATION. He had been trying frantically to get permission for me to examine the bodies, but had met one legal roadblock after another. The official post-mortem examination had been made that afternoon, but the authorities decided not to allow any independent observers as witnesses. Pratt's staff spent the day gathering all the affidavits and notarized documents that the authorities required for permission to examine the bodies—but each time they filled one request, another took its place.

Pratt was forced to take a heart-burdening step. He asked Mrs. Chaney, the mother of one of the slain boys, for permission to have her son's body examined by me as soon as the body was released to

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her by the authorities. She agreed without any hesitation. The Neshoba County District Attorney then promised Pratt that when all papers were in order he would sanction the release of the body to Mrs. Chaney and we could get on with our grim task.

Finally, at 1 a.m., the last of the legal papers were stacked neatly on Pratt's desk. All that was left to do was call the District Attorney and have him authorize the Director of the University of Mississippi Hospital where the autopsy had been performed to release the body of James Chaney to Mrs. Chaney and to us for examination. The District Attorney, Raiford Jones, had given Pratt his home telephone number. Pratt put in a call to the D.A. When he put down the receiver a few minutes later, his thin face was hot with the fever of frustration.

"The operator says the D.A.'s phone is out of order and will be out of order for 24 hours."

Pratt asked the police in Philadelphia, where Jones lives, to go out to his house and deliver the message. He made the request half-heartedly. The police didn't call back.

Before I went to bed I read carefully the accounts in the late newspapers of the post-mortem examination that had been made on the boys that afternoon. The examination was conducted, the story said, by a private pathologist ostensibly appointed by the coroner, the University of Mississippi Pathology Department, and the FBI. The report said that the bodies were badly decomposed, that all three boys had been shot, Schwerner and Goodman once and Chaney three times, and that there was no other evidence of mutilation or bodily injury. It also said that Chaney's wrist had been fractured by a bullet.

This report was quickly dispatched by the wire service. The impression given nationally was that a meticulous examination had been made of the deceased under the supervision of university pathologists and the FBI.

But the report just didn't make good medical sense to me. The statements that the bodies were badly decomposed and that there was no evidence of mutilation or other injury were contradictory—if the bodies were badly decomposed, it would be extremely unlikely that an official determination could be made as to the extent of bodily injuries. The maddening technicalities that kept me from examining the bodies left me angry. I began, in a solemn mood, to look forward to my sad task the next day.

DR. WELLS AND I WENT down to the hotel dining room for breakfast the next morning. The hostess sat us at a table directly in front of the door, and after some discussion she reluctantly moved us further inside the dining room. That, I guess, was a mistake. The table next to us sagged under a giant weighing somewhere between 300 and 350 pounds with a bright red sunburnt neck the breadth of a miniature saddle. He was hunched over the table, which was heaped with a fantastic assortment of food which I believe represented every entree on the breakfast menu: stacked pancakes, ham, several fried eggs, sausages, hominy grits, hash brown potatoes—and a medium-sized breakfast steak.

Both his hands were moving at the same time towards his mouth in a remarkable exhibition of physical coordination. Between shovels, he happened to glance over at our table. He was thunderstruck. His hands hung, motionless, in mid-air. He stopped chewing. He stared at us in complete disbelief. He seemed unable to comprehend that a white man and a Negro were actually sitting together at a table across from him.

He jerked his thick neck down toward the plate and tried to go back to his food, but he couldn't stop staring at us. He would concentrate on eating, and almost immediately his head would snap back in our direction. This went on for at least ten minutes, with his head snapping up and down as if he were watching an indoor tennis match.

His hate stares were directed at me—his eyes were sign-posts saying Hate—I was a white man betraying his race because I was having breakfast with a black man. The "redneck" (this is, curiously, a slang term in the South for White Citizens Council types; in this case, it was also a physical description) finally gave up the uneven match with his attention and pushed back his chair like the Queen Mary leaving berth. He sidled out of the dining room.

I realize this man sounds like a caricature. But he *was* real. This is one of the incredible things about the unbelievable world of Mississippi: what most people regard as a caricature is real there.

But then, Mississippi is a mass of caricatures: Dr. Wells, a Negro, once beneath contempt from a Southerner's point of view, shares a room with a white man, despite the trauma experienced by hotel employees. Yet the same man can't share the hotel's swimming pool.

Whites in Mississippi sing the praises of America and its glorious traditions, then they go out and lynch their fellow Americans.

Dr. Wells left for the medical committee headquarters, and I walked out into the center patio and

found John Pratt sitting in a deck chair beside the pool.

"Sit down," he said. "There's nothing to do now but wait."

The funeral director hired by Mrs. Chaney was on his way to Philadelphia, Pratt said, with all the papers necessary to effect the release of young Chaney's body. After presenting the papers to the Philadelphia authorities, he would drive back to Jackson, stop at the hotel for us, and then proceed to the University of Mississippi Medical Center where I could examine Chaney. The round-trip took about five hours, so we had nothing to do but wait until he showed up.

In the meantime, two COFO (Council of Federated Organizations, a broad front of civil rights groups) workers had taken up positions at the morgue entrance to make sure the bodies would not be removed without our knowledge.

IN RETROSPECT, IT SEEMS AMAZING how you can proceed with the ordinary pleasures of life in the midst of such a situation, but this is what we did. We went swimming, sunned ourselves at poolside, and chatted. The conversation was almost light-hearted—a reaction, I think, against contemplating the grim job before us.

I told Pratt that I had brought a book with me. I was reading "Mississippi: The Closed Society." Pratt frowned. "If you plan to read that in the open, out here at the pool, I suggest you take off the dust jacket. These people around here are pretty touchy—they don't like outsiders reading about them." I must admit that I felt rather silly, removing the jacket of my book. But I did it. I had decided to take the advice of Mississippi veterans on the best way to survive in that strange country.

I became aware that there were no Negroes in the pool. I asked Pratt what would happen if a Negro guest of this desegregated hotel went swimming.

"Oh, it's been tried," Pratt said. "But something always happens—like the hotel management suddenly announcing that the filter system was 'not functioning properly' and it would be necessary to clear the pool for an indefinite period of time. The word gets around quick enough to the Negroes, and as far as I know no Negro has ever succeeded in swimming one lap in that pool."

"How did Mrs. Chaney take it—when you talked to her about examining her son's body?"

I asked a question that had been in my mind since I heard about the bereaved mother's brave decision consenting to a second autopsy on her son.

"She was beautiful," Pratt said. "When I asked her, she said, very quietly, 'I want everyone to know everything possible about what has happened.'" Then she added: "I know he could die only once, but if they did these awful things to him, this ought to be no secret. It is even more important now that the guilty ones be brought to trial and justice and be punished. God must forgive them; it is very difficult for me to do so."

The pressure on Mrs. Chaney to refuse permission was tremendous: Philadelphia was against it. Without her, we would never see the body—the authorities in Philadelphia seemed decidedly unfavorable to a second medical examination. "Philadelphia is like an armed camp," Pratt said. "When I went there to see the District Attorney, he had to arrange for me to arrive in the city incognito. Unemployed white men—they're called 'Deputy Sheriffs' in Philadelphia—strut around the center of town all day, displaying their gun holsters, on the watch for any 'intruders.'" The atmosphere is murderous. Mrs. Chaney's a widow with young children. It took a lot of guts for her to sign those papers. Retaliation is easy in Philadelphia." (*Editor's note: Three weeks after she signed the consent for the examination, Mrs. Chaney's home was bombed and shot into.*)

PRATT WAS PAGED on the hotel public address system. When he went inside to answer the phone I browsed through a file of reports from field teams of the Medical Committee for Human Rights. I only had the stomach to read two of them.

The first report described extended treatment given a young Negro civil rights worker for fifteen or twenty burns scattered all over his body. He had been stopped by police in a small Mississippi town for questioning, and while they questioned him they jabbed lighted cigarettes into his flesh. The burns weren't treated, and were ulcerous and infected when the medical volunteers found the boy.

Another Mississippi town, a medical report said, had activated a local statute requiring any "stranger" entering the town to register at police headquarters—as if he were entering a foreign country. The youth in the report had registered, but a policeman insisted that the boy come to the station to "check" his compliance with the statute. The boy's name was found on the books. The officer then told him to "run along," and in the same breath swung his billy club into the boy's groin with such force that the youth passed out. Surgery was later necessary to evacuate a blood clot (larger than an orange) created by the blow.

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I was too depressed to read further. I have no reason to doubt the authenticity of these reports. After conversations with physicians who have been in Mississippi, I believe that incidents of this nature—with varying degrees of brutality—go on regularly and relentlessly every day of the week. They are too frequent to be considered “newsworthy.”

In the Alice-in-Wonderland environment of Mississippi, the grotesque becomes matter of fact and the simplest idea can meet the strangest and most insurmountable obstacles. One pitifully sad case in point: Mickey Schwerner’s parents and James Chaney’s mother decided that they would like both their sons buried together in the Chaney family plot in Mississippi.

This just couldn’t be done. The Negro funeral director for Mrs. Chaney did not dare to pick up the white boy’s body at the University hospital. If he did, he feared some technical reason would be found for revoking his license. And the bereaved Schwerners were unable to find a white undertaker in Mississippi who would transport the body of their son to a Negro cemetery. They were forced to abandon the idea.

PRATT CAME IN AND SAID THAT our wait was over. The undertaker had arrived with the necessary papers. Dr. Wells, Dr. Goodrich, Pratt and I drove together to the morgue. As we passed through the quiet and clean streets of Jackson, I was hit by the horrible realization that this pleasant town—the opposite of the stereotype of the ‘typical’ Southern town, with nary a Faulknerian degenerate ghosting the streets—was actually a façade. The scary thing was that Jackson looked so pleasant and sleepy—and if this rotten core of hate could be underneath, it could be anywhere.

Our official reception at the morgue was cool, but courteous. The University of Mississippi Medical Center is a large and striking building in downtown Jackson, built, incidentally, with federal funds. We met the director of the hospital and several members of the pathology department in the well-lit basement hallway that leads to the autopsy room. We exchanged professional courtesies, and one of the doctors pointed towards the double stainless steel doors ahead of us. “It’s inside,” he said.

Only two of the bodies were still there. Goodman’s corpse had been sent out the night before, and he was buried before there was a chance for a second autopsy. The Mississippi authorities refused to allow Schwerner’s parents to give telephone permission for me to examine the body—so it

was young Chaney who lay on the gurney wheeled to the center of the room.

One of the University pathologists stepped forward, silently, and helped me slide Chaney's corpse from the gurney to the stainless steel examining table in the middle of the room. He stepped backward, and lined up with his three comrades on one side of the table, facing me. I stood alone on the opposite side. The only sound in the green-tiled room was the rough noise of the zipper on the protective plastic bag as I pulled it away from Chaney's body.

I was immediately struck by how slight and frail this young man was—a thin boy with tender skin. I looked at his wrist, the one that was reported broken in the unofficial examination, and I couldn't find the bullet hole that the newspapers mentioned. The wrist was broken, alright. Bones were smashed, so badly that his wrist must have been literally flapping when he was carried.

But there was no indication of any bullet hole.

I looked up at the three doctors opposite me. Their faces were stone. I motioned to the wrist—I asked where the bullet hole was.

One of the stone figures facing me offered a mumbled explanation, something about how Chaney's hand had been across his chest when the first examination was made and the examiner must have mistaken the bullet holes in his chest for one in the hand.

I looked at him in amazement, but our eyes never met. During the remainder of the examination, not another word was spoken.

Then I noticed Chaney's jaw. It was broken—the lower jaw was completely shattered, split vertically, from some tremendous force. I moved the shattered pieces of his jaw in vertical directions for the three doctors to see. They remained silent. I couldn't catch their eyes.

I carefully examined the body, and found that the bones in the right shoulder were crushed—again, from some strong and direct blow.

His internal organs had been removed in the first autopsy, so it was impossible to ascertain if Chaney had suffered internal injuries also.

But one thing was certain: this frail boy had been beaten in an inhuman fashion. The blows that had so terribly shattered his bones—I surmised he must have been beaten with chains, or a pipe—were in themselves sufficient to cause death. It was again impossible to say if he had died before he was shot—the bullets had been removed in the first autopsy, and the bullet tracts had been carefully excised so I could not trace the path of the bullets.

I examined his skull and it was crushed, too. The fracture was circular and depressed, from another direct blow.

I could barely believe the destruction to these frail young bones. In my twenty-five years as a pathologist and medical examiner, I have never seen bones so severely shattered, except in tremendously high speed accidents or airplane crashes.

It was obvious to any first-year medical student that this boy had been beaten to a pulp.

I have been conducting examinations of this type for a quarter century, but for the first time I found myself so emotionally charged that it was difficult to retain my professional composure. I felt every fiber in my own body shaking, as I involuntarily imagined the scene at the time this youngster received such a vicious beating to shatter his bones in this incredible manner.

I felt like screaming at these impassive observers still silently standing across the table.

But I knew that no rage of mine would tear their curtain of silence. I took off the green surgical smock they had given me, thanked them for their cooperation, and left the room as fast as I could. I went straight to the hotel, dictated a report of my gruesome findings, and left immediately for the airport.

I felt an irrational, immediate urge to get out of Mississippi the fastest way possible. The first plane out went the wrong way from New York—to New Orleans—but I felt an indescribable relief when I boarded it and flew—I guess you could say I almost fled—from Jackson.

EPILOGUE

The "unofficial" autopsy report made shortly after the discovery of the bodies remains the only public document on the deaths. The Coroner's Jury of Neshoba County ruled several months after the murders that the cause or causes of death of the three boys could not be officially determined. Therefore the Coroner's Jury had no reason to ask the District Attorney to seek an indictment from the Grand Jury. An official autopsy report has never been made.
