

PORTRAIT OF THREE HEROES

TOM DENT

IN JANUARY 1963, as press assistant for the NAACP Legal Defense Fund in New York, I went to Jackson, Mississippi to arrange a press conference for James Meredith to announce he would return to the University of Mississippi for a second semester. I had met Meredith the previous summer, and had been close to him and Mississippi civil rights people during the time our "Ole Miss" suit developed toward its tragic, but necessary, climax. This January trip, then, was really a chance for me to see again those friends whom I had come to know and admire during those fateful days.

Meredith had been in his apartment only two weeks, the first tenant to occupy this new red-brick structure. It is located on an unpaved road parallel to the legendary railroad tracks. His place is small; four rooms sparsely furnished. Barely enough room for himself and his wife, June, their three-year old son, John, and Meredith's sister (who helps take care of John while June attends classes).

Less than an hour before, flying over Mississippi, I had felt, even within the air-pressured confines of our jet cabin, a certain tension. A white man sat next to me while I read a New York Public Library copy of Richard Wright's *The Outsider*. Even though Richard Wright was born in Mississippi I could not talk about *The Outsider* with the man from Mississippi next to me. The distance between our lives was so great that the illusion of proximity created by sitting side-by-side on that airplane was only a cruel joke.

Now Meredith, Medgar Evers and I were in front of the apartment house, talking.

We were concerned with whether Meredith should get his car repaired, or junk it. It had stalled on him at the Oxford campus a few weeks ago, and while he stood with the hood up trying to locate the trouble he was the target of insults and derisive laughter from

Tom Dent is a free-lance writer from New Orleans and a former editor of the literary magazine "UMBRA."



leg

JAMES MEREDITH

those models of young America—his fellow students at the University of Mississippi.

Oxford, Mississippi is the town where novelist William Faulkner lived, wrote and died. In 1956 he 'praised' Negroes in *Harpers*: "They have become skilled artisans and craftsmen capable of holding their own in a culture of technocracy."

As we stood behind those railroad tracks a train passed slowly by, and I wondered how Faulkner would describe the life and significance of Meredith, or Evers, if he were alive. I wondered how he could possibly comprehend the life vitiating behind those railroad tracks in terms such as *skilled artisans and craftsmen*, which means people who perform competently a task which they are taught.

Skilled artisans or craftsmen do not challenge a *system*, nor do they ask questions. But whites never go beyond the railroad tracks (except for the police to quell 'disturbances'), thus the tracks symbolize the limits of a white southern reality—a very limited reality indeed.

The tragedy of Mississippi—that lazy, blind, comfortable swamp-land—is the tragedy of the South. Whites cannot understand what is happening to 'their Negroes' in their 'magnolia state,' nor what will happen. And Faulkner had been their most persuasive mind.

Robert Smith, an intimate of Meredith and Evers, drove up. He is a short, stout man in his early thirties who looks as if he eats well. He does. Smith and his father own a supermarket in Jackson and considerable real estate. But the Smiths have used their money more ethically than any Negroes I know; they have contributed money to the Civil Rights Movement. Almost every person who has come here to help Medgar Evers has stayed at Smith's home, travelled in his car. His home is a civil rights hotel. Evers, Meredith, Smith: a dedicated (and lonely) triumvirate.

"Well, you know if you want to make a telephone call, you can use the one in the back of the store," Robert told Jay (Meredith). "It's not tapped." We laughed.

The telephones of Evers, Meredith and Smith in Jackson were always bugged. "When I want to make an important call," Evers remarked, "I always stop and say 'and I hope the white folks are listening!'"

So Meredith and I drove off to Smith's store. Evers went back to work.

Even by big city standards Smith's supermarket is an impressive business. He sells groceries and meats, cosmetics, newspapers, drugs, clothing, a whole variety of stuff.

I needed some things for my three-day stay. I purchased them there.



MEDGAR EVERS

"Just pick out what you need and take it," Smith told me.

Meredith loves people, but he doesn't have to go to *them* anymore. They come to him. When we returned to his apartment late that afternoon, we discovered (to my shock, anyway) a white man helping little John to the toilet. I thought Meredith had expected him. But I learned he had not been expected. He had merely found out where Meredith lived, come there and waited for him.

I recognized his name: Walter Lord, author of *A Night To Remember* and other historical documentaries.

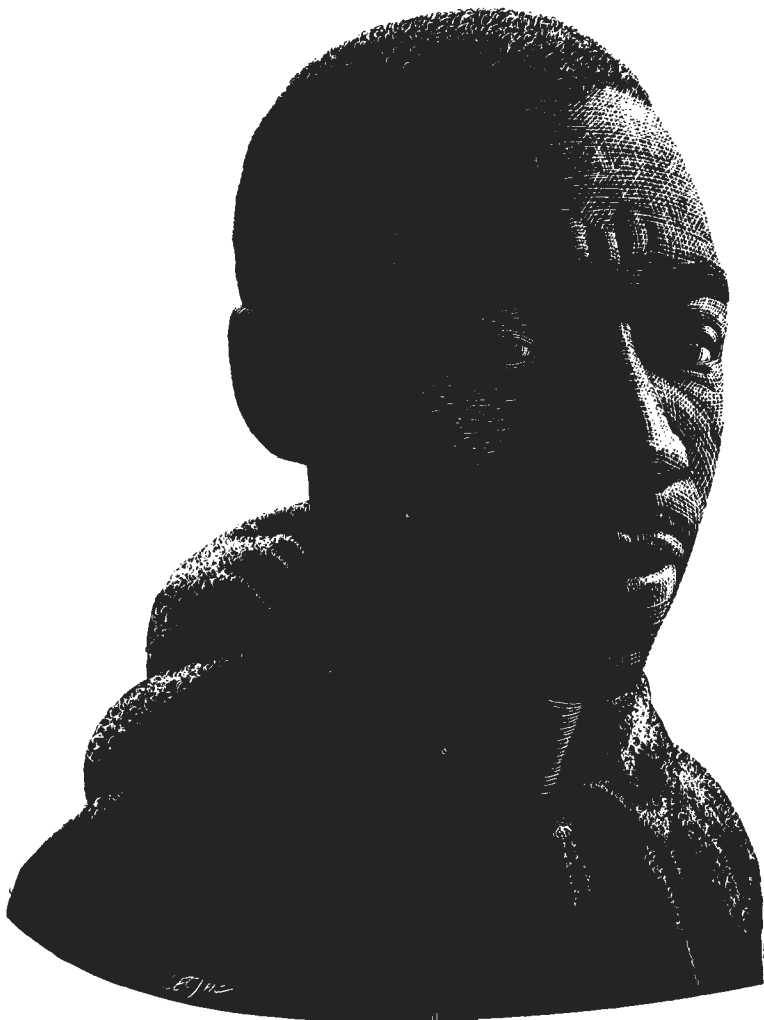
When Lord told Meredith about his plans for a book on the Ole Miss case, Jay said "the only objection I can think of is that someone might think you're using me to make money for yourself." Lord blinked, perhaps not believing what he had heard. Embarrassed, he mumbled something like "the book will be in the bookstores if people want to buy it."

But Walter Lord was persistent. He stayed, even through dinner, trying to get Meredith to answer questions about Mississippi politics, or the "battle of Ole Miss," while the telephone rang, friends dropped in and the baby cried. A year before no one cared what Meredith thought. A year before a white man would never have come to the home of a Mississippi Negro to ask him what he thought. Did Walter Lord expect to understand the realities of Mississippi race oppression, or what Meredith knew, in one chaotic hour?

Meredith was used to this chaos, he even seemed to thrive on it. But I tried to keep press people away from the apartment so he could at least have some privacy. Press people are told "get a story," and rarely respect anyone's privacy unless made to. That night, two television cameramen came. They wanted to set up their cameras and shoot Meredith "in the intimacy of his home," even though Jay was then bathing.

I read some of the mail Jay had received; there were boxes of letters in his bedroom. White southerners, Negroes from the north and south, soldiers, school children, college students and student-associations, foreign students, social workers (the most predictable, self-conscious letters), religious crackpots, race baiters and race haters—all wrote. Meredith had touched something deep in these people.

The ones that most moved me were from white southern youths. They couldn't ignore the realities of racial oppression any longer and they felt guilty about it. The letters appeared to be attempts to somehow expiate their guilt: "Go boy go, we can't tell our friends how we feel, but we're for you."



CLYDE KENNARD

Of slight build, medium height, and dark brown skin, James Meredith speaks in a slow, high-pitched voice. He has a way of staring at people when he speaks, as if he wants to see how he is registering. He can be diplomatic; sometimes very, very blunt.

Though his attorneys, Mrs. Constance Baker Motley and Jack Greenberg, worried about his safety that previous summer, Meredith had absolutely no fear of possible injury to himself. He was almost foolishly unconcerned. Thus, even after he came under federal protection he often tried to get away from the marshals, and drove places by himself without escort. No warning from anyone did much good. He simply wasn't afraid, and strongly resented having his movements circumscribed. He would simply shrug off our admonitions with, "Oh, they're not going to shoot me."

During the time he was considering applying to the University, (apparently, he had thought about it a long time because his wife said they often discussed returning to Mississippi, even while they were courting) Meredith grew a beard. Mrs. Motley finally asked him to cut it off. Meredith consented, but one day he explained why he grew the beard. "I knew," he told her, "that if this case was filed and I actually did enter Ole Miss, I would have to withstand the pressure of being different, of being *strange* in the eyes of many people. Growing the beard was my test, a way of finding out whether I could go through with it."

Jay was very proud of the two farms he owned in his hometown, Kosciusko. He had purchased this property with money saved while he was in the Air Force. Though it wasn't valuable property, Meredith wanted to *own* something.

"Hell," he often said, "all I want is the right to what I can earn for myself. Someday, I'd like to own my whole block."

The next morning Medgar Evers heard that Governor Barnett had pardoned Clyde Kennard. He would be released that morning from University Hospital in Jackson, where he had been hospitalized during his jail sentence.

Briefly, this was Kennard's story: he had tried in September, 1959 to enter Mississippi Southern University in Hattiesburg where he lived. Such an attempt by a Negro was unheard of at that time. Kennard had made his intentions known; the police were waiting for him. On the day he attempted to enroll he was denied admission, then arrested on a bogus "speeding and possession of liquor" charge (Mississippi is a 'dry' state).

The Supreme Court of Mississippi later threw out those charges,

but the Hattiesburg police weren't through with Kennard. On Nov. 14, 1960 he was arrested on a charge of inducing a 19-year-old Negro to steal five bags of chicken feed (worth \$25), and sentenced to *seven years* in jail. The NAACP Legal Defense Fund had unsuccessfully tried several legal moves to free him.

Dick Gregory became interested in Kennard's story through Medgar Evers. Gregory sent private investigators at his own expense to Hattiesburg to seek out the truth. His investigators discovered that Kennard was innocent, located the boy who committed the theft, and Gregory even offered to bring the boy to Chicago and find him a job if he would testify in Kennard's behalf. He refused because he feared retaliation against his family in Mississippi.

A few people knew that Kennard was now dying of incurable cancer. It was only because of his rapidly deteriorating condition that Barnett had that morning pardoned him.

When we entered University Hospital I was immediately struck by the absurd layout of the place. The segregatory devices had apparently been designed by a psychotic with a fascination for labyrinthine geometrics. The entrance to the Negro side was half the size of the entrance to the white side, the two entrances divided by a partition. Negroes were waited-on on one side of the central waiting desk, whites on the other. The waiting rooms were, of course, segregated, with water fountains designated: 'white only,' 'colored only,' 'white personnel only.' The rest rooms: 'white men,' 'white male personnel,' 'colored men,' 'colored male personnel,' 'white ladies,' 'colored females.' The hospital was a huge maze with signs pointing to where Negroes could or could not go (whites, however, were free to violate these signs if they wished).

Medgar stood at the 'colored' desk waiting to get some papers signed for Kennard's release. Kennard stood almost unnoticeable beside him, wearing denim trousers and a hooded blue sweat shirt. He is short, extremely thin (about 90 pounds) with no shoulders. Soon he would be out of jail for the first time in two years, but no joy or exultation showed on his face.

Kennard was thirty-four, his hair cut closely, his skin a very dark brown. He was extremely polite and soft-spoken. I wanted very much to talk with him, so after a wait of about fifteen minutes and still no service, I asked Kennard to come outside with me so we might talk, away from the suffocating atmosphere of the hospital.

It had been an overcast day, and when we reached the hospital door it began to rain.

We sat in Medgar's blue Oldsmobile. Kennard spoke about Parchman Prison:

"There's segregation even in prison. Let's sue the jails, too. They had fifteen farms at Parchman and no Negro non-inmate employees. We were like slaves. They even fed us leftovers from what the white prisoners ate. The white prisoners had the best jobs, lived in the best buildings. Parchman is just a modernized slave-labor camp."

Two Negro ministers from Hattiesburg came over to the car. They had heard about Kennard's release on the radio, and had come to the hospital to offer him a ride home. Kennard knew them and greeted them warmly.

We asked Kennard if the other Negro prisoners at Parchman knew his story, why he had been there? He said they did; and added:

"The night I left to come to the hospital they held a prayer meeting in our barracks. I told them not to do it because it's against the rules and I didn't want them to get whipped because of me. But they sang and sang, and the guards took names and names. In Mississippi in prisons, it's legal to whip prisoners—the laws says ten strokes. We called the whip 'black Annie.' I know they were all whipped the next day."

We began to talk about the significance of Meredith, of recent changes in Mississippi. He made, curiously, an observation which I heard from Meredith and Evers: "The white people who run this state are stupid. If the whites with power were more intelligent they might save themselves great tragedy. But the way Mississippi is going now, it's going to fall very hard."

He was excited over Meredith, what was happening in Mississippi. Kennard seemed like a soldier who had been captured at the front; now freed, he was as excited over Meredith's success as if it were his own. I asked him if he had ever met Meredith. He said "no," but he would like to.

I told him that he, in a way, had laid the groundwork for Meredith. "Maybe," he replied sadly, "but we look in life for success most of the time."

Kennard and I and the ministers had spent almost two hours talking, but Medgar still hadn't come. We wondered what on earth had happened to him. When I went back into the hospital, I found Medgar waiting now at the 'colored only' *prescription desk* for Clyde's pills. He had to wait until every white patient's prescription had been filled before they would serve him. They also recognized Medgar as 'the NAACP man,' so they made him wait longer. Medgar was

furious. I was depressed and furious. We had been at that hospital three hours.

Medgar Evers was a very cool professional. Of all the civil rights people in Mississippi, I always felt safest with him because he had such marvelous self-control, seemed to know what was happening at all times, and had defied the white people for so long with no loss of dignity.

In September, he had driven Mrs. Motley, her secretary, Roberta Thomas, and me to Meridian during the height of the Ole Miss crisis. We were driving in the morning, when the Mississippi highways are constricted with periodic school zone speed limits, so that one moment you may go sixty, then suddenly you're in a fifteen mile-per-hour zone. We were followed three-quarters of the way by patrol cars just waiting for Evers to overshoot a limit, but he never did.

We were on our way to the federal district court on the Thursday Meredith was first turned back from Oxford by Governor Barnett. We had to drive through the small town where Evers was born.

"When I was discharged from the service," he said while driving, "I came back by bus to this town. When we were almost there the driver asked me to move back, back to the back. Well, I wouldn't do it. Hell, I'd just been on a battlefield for my country. When we reached my home town, the driver signalled to some men in town. They came on the bus and beat me within an inch of my life." He laughed softly. "It was the worst beating I ever had. But after that I was a different man."

In Meridian ugly crowds, which looked like the pictures one had seen of lynch mobs, loitered around the federal courthouse. Mississippi was, that day in September, in a state of shock because of *us*, and I personally felt there was danger. The small mobs outside the courthouse were waiting, just waiting—to *see* more than act. But they *knew* Evers, and as we walked through them to get to his car their recognition of him was obvious. So was their hatred.

Evers was a *field* man, his office was wherever he was needed in the state.

He told us that he was followed by police radio or patrol cars wherever he went. Medgar was not one to take unnecessary chances. He had no martyr complex. In fact, he had some white friends in Jackson who tipped him off when they received inside information. They were in the confidence of the police.

When we left the hospital that afternoon, Medgar was angry. Yet, he was still Medgar, that is, he was not so bitter that he couldn't

offer a ride to the Negro section, to two women who had been waiting at the prescription desk with him.

We spoke of suing the hospital. Medgar said to these two women: "We're going to sue that hospital. I want you women to testify that the clerk told you to get your pills from a 'for colored only' window." They giggled. "Come on, now," Medgar urged, his voice edgy, "we've got to *stop* this stuff. All you have to do is testify as to what actually happened, nothing else. Give me your names and addresses, write them down on this piece of paper. Here, here's a pencil."

Finally, one of the women in the car said, "so wha's gon' happen when we go back there for some more pills if they know we don' signed some lawsuit?"

So that's it. The white man has the *system* going for him, he owns everything and controls everything. And Negroes have to depend on that system too. I made in my notes this comment: "Poor Medgar, another unknown, defenseless, almost hopeless hero."

After Kennard departed for Hattiesburg we went to a restaurant down the street where we found Meredith. He was with author James Baldwin, who had flown in at noon, and Steve Schapiro, a young *Life* photographer who was doing a picture story on Baldwin.

Meredith left them and went to the rear of the restaurant where he danced with any girl who would dance with him. The girls were students at Jackson State College, only a block away. The tension never showed in Meredith's face, but it was there. During that period he was frantic, desperate for relaxation. And he loved to dance.

"Toooommm," he said with twinkle and slow drawl, "I must be crazy to leave music like this to go to a place like Ole Miss!"

Jack Greenberg had suggested Meredith preface his press conference with a written statement saying he had called the conference because this was the easiest way to announce he was returning. It was Tuesday, the night before the conference. Meredith said, "you know, Tom, I don't think I'll do that." I figured he had his reasons. That night we gathered at Meredith's apartment to rehearse what "Jay" would say in reply to questions the next morning. Medgar Evers, James Baldwin, Robert Smith and several Jackson ministers were there.

Meredith actually had kept the fact he was returning pretty much of a secret. Only his intimates knew. The complication had been getting someone to help take care of his son, because June was going to school too and she couldn't do both. The problem was solved when Meredith's sister came from Kosciusko to help out.

But the Jackson papers were letting their hopes get the better of them and were printing stories that day saying Meredith was going to withdraw. Meredith enjoyed tantalizing local reporters, and loving the dramatic, tried to keep everyone in the dark as long as he could.

Our rehearsal soon became a "bull-session," then the "bull-session" a fascinating monologue by Meredith about what actually happened the night he entered Ole Miss. It was all so very complicated; the full story of the dealings between Mississippi and the Federal government has not been told.

Meredith was proudest of his condemnation of the Army's use of segregated troops in the first occupation of Oxford. He told us the Justice Department people *begged* him not to release a statement. They felt that once he was in safely, he should be happy and keep his mouth shut. Meredith told us:

"The next day, the Army even found a *Chinese* soldier and put him in front of our dormitory. They had had Negroes on permanent *garbage* detail, with white sergeants.

"I saw one of those army trucks and I couldn't believe my eyes. I yelled: 'Maann, what you guys *doing*?' A Negro lieutenant there was on the truck. They had told him 'take a rest on the football field, we don't need you,'" Meredith said.

"If someone hadn't made some changes soon, *very soon*, I would have left. What the hell's the point of the whole thing if the Army does that?"

After a few hours sleep, Jay's son woke me up. It seemed as if I hadn't slept at all. "Daddy said to read this," he said, throwing two hand-written pages on the couch.

Meredith had decided to write a statement after all; in bed, after that long night. He knew what he wanted to get over: it was absurd that a student returning to school was a news item. Near the end he said "the Negro" would not return to Ole Miss, but that *he would*. I liked this because it coupled his announcement with a comment on how he wanted his actions to be interpreted.

Meredith was always in touch with his own sense of reality. As in the case of the statement, he would never do or say anything that wasn't real to him, that he couldn't see a reason for, according to his own thinking.

What actually happened at the press conference was unforgettable. The time: 10:00 that morning. The place: Masonic Temple Hall, in the building where the NAACP office was located, in Jackson. I was

surprised to discover we had a *full* audience of Negroes who wanted to hear the decision 'live.' It was really supposed to be a 'press only' conference. But we had all been so busy no one was policing the door. It was too late now. Evers sat with Meredith at a table facing the newsmen. Meredith was to read his statement, Evers would recognize questioners.

Meredith began slowly reading to a tense silence. When he reached the sentence, "the 'Negro' will not return..." two or three Jackson newsmen broke out of the room to be the first to telephone the good news. Meredith was marvelous. He paused, waited until they were out, then continued, "but I, James Meredith..."

I imagine everyone heard the cheering from our uninvited audience. It was like an explosion—unrestrained and instantaneous. I looked at Baldwin and we *understood*. That cheer, what a lie it made of the Mississippi 'contented Negro' myth! It was beautiful.

Well, Jay and Medgar went through with the rest, but that was the press conference. That was it. We were all limp.

The hall cleared. A few photographers took additional pictures. Meredith's wife, June, slipped quietly out of the hall to return to class.

Evers must return to the work he loves. Meredith must go back to Oxford where he cannot dance.

Within an hour Baldwin and I have left a still rainy Jackson for New York City.

Five months later, the body of Medgar Evers lay in the same Masonic Temple Hall where we had conducted that small triumph of a press conference.

We came to the hall that June day to mourn his murder, and to reflect on the meaning of his life and death. Medgar had been shot in the back in the driveway of his home and fell bleeding to death, beside his blue Oldsmobile.

He had been taken to the emergency room of the same hospital where he had been made to wait hours for Clyde Kennard's pills. But it was too late, they could not make him wait any longer.

Two weeks later a small newspaper item—no more than a paragraph—announced the death, in Chicago, of Clyde Kennard.