



Killed: Wayne Yancey

The most traumatic experience for all of the Holly Springs staff was the mysterious death of Wayne Yancey. Wayne and Charlie Scales were driving a 1964 white Ford when they collided head-on with another vehicle en route to Holly Springs from Memphis, Tennessee. Yancey was a twenty-one-year-old black male who had come to Holly Springs from Chicago, where he graduated from Cooley Vocational School and then became an active participant in SNCC's local Chicago chapter. He was reared in Paris, Tennessee, where his parents lived. Wayne was lively, energetic, outwardly loud and tough yet warm and gentle inside. While always sporting his signature cowboy hat, he had the uncanny ability to lighten up the darkest room and inspire others to give their ultimate effort. Such dauntless charisma seemed to cloak any fears he may have harbored, but he was mindful and cautious, and always warning us of ever present hostility and impending danger.

I remember a black man, someone I had never seen before, rushed up to us and said, "A Freedom Rider has been killed up the road in a car crash!" We had not seen an ambulance nor any emergency vehicle. We began to scout around to see what was going on. We found the badly damaged car at a service station and then went to the hospital. Oddly, the police were already at the hospital. We were shocked to find Wayne's body lying in the back of the ambulance/hearse with blood dripping into a puddle beneath. We could not tell how long the body had been there or if Wayne had died at the scene or while still in the ambulance waiting for medical attention. Charlie was inside the hospital when we took Kathy Dahl, the project nurse, inside to check on him. Even though the hospital had not provided extensive medical treatment to Charlie, the chief of police was trying to put him under arrest for vehicular homicide. Immediately Ivanhoe asked Kathy to work on getting Charlie to a Memphis hospital. Kathy, in her authoritative voice, said that Charlie was in need of immediate medical attention and if he didn't get to Memphis quickly he may die. The police chief was reluctant to let Charlie go. More negotiations were required for the sheriff to finally release Charlie, who was driven to Memphis and then flown to Chicago. Charlie maintained that as he was lying on the ground immediately following the wreck, some white men walked over to him and said,



Charlie Scales (left) and Wayne Yancey, August 1, 1964 -- the day of the crash.

"Stay still or you will get the same as your buddy." Charlie assumed that they may have been responsible for not allowing the car to return to the appropriate lane.

That night the undertaker called and asked if we wanted to be there while he prepared Wayne's body. I went along with Ivanhoe, and we stayed with Wayne until his body was made ready for his coffin.

Wayne's death had a profound impact on those of us in Holly Springs, not only because we loved him like a brother, but because for some they saw first hand how the lives of poor black males were not valued in Mississippi. There was no fanfare, no FBI, no investigation, no massive press coverage. No named civil rights leader rushed down to Paris. Just us, the family, and our brother. We all climbed into cars and drove to Paris for the final homecoming of Wayne Yancey, a Freedom Fighter like so many others who had given their lives for freedom, justice, and equality. When we returned to Holly Springs, we hung the cowboy hat in the living room where it remained for the rest of the summer - as did Wayne's spirit.

Cleveland Sellers