



THE LEGACY OF A MURDER

Racial killings from the civil rights era still haunt families and the country.

By Benjamin Greenberg

JIM PRUITT/ISTOCKPHOTO

"I HEARD A SCREAM, and I said, 'That's Mother, that's Mother.' And we all started running to look." It was August 14, 1959, near midnight, in Centreville, Mississippi. Laura O'Quinn Smith, then 33, and her brother Clarence, then 32, rushed from the house and found their father, Samuel O'Quinn, shot in the back outside of the front gate of Whitaker Plantation, the 235-acre family land.

Clarence got his mother and wounded father back

into the car and drove to the Field Memorial Community Hospital. Samuel O'Quinn died en route, in the arms of his wife, Ida. He was 58 years old and the father of 11 children. No one has ever been charged with the crime.

Today, Laura and Clarence, now ages 81 and 80, are living in Springfield, Massachusetts, along with two other siblings, Phalba and Rance. They are one of numerous families who are still waiting for justice in racial murders

from the civil rights era. "It would give closure for us," said Phalba O'Quinn Plummer, who is now 71. "It would really help a lot for all of us to know what happened."

The FBI is currently reviewing approximately 100 cases that it may reopen; 84 of the victims have been named, and of those, 34 are from Mississippi. The true number of unresolved cases, however, is unknown. A review of a relatively narrow set of FBI and state documents found references to at least seven murders in Mississippi that are not on the published FBI list.

O'QUINN'S CHILDREN SAY THEIR FATHER BECAME A TARGET FOR MURDER BECAUSE OF RUMORS CIRCULATING THAT HE HAD GONE NORTH TO ATTEND THE NAACP CONVENTION.

The lack of justice for Samuel O'Quinn and other Blacks murdered during the civil rights struggles of the 1950s and '60s is the haunting background for current events that every so often lay bare the broken promises of a supposedly post-civil rights society: the double standard of justice meted out to the Jena 6; the vast numbers of people, overwhelmingly Black, treated as disposable during and after Hurricanes Katrina and Rita; the Klan-like torture and rape of Megan Williams.

Last June, the U.S. House of Representatives passed the Emmett Till Unsolved Civil Rights Crime Act (known as the "Till Bill"), which would allocate \$13.5 million annually for a special FBI office and Civil Rights Division unit to investigate civil rights-era crimes in coordination with local and state authorities. The Till Bill passed the House in June, but Senator Tom Coburn of Oklahoma placed a hold on the bill, keeping it stuck in the Senate through at least the winter recess.

* * *

The O'Quinns were a prosperous Black family in 1950's Mississippi. A graduate of the Tuskegee Institute, Samuel O'Quinn was a certified plumber, electrician and carpenter. After working as the assistant town engineer and as the only plumber in Centreville, he opened O'Quinn's Café with his wife, Ida, in 1937. He also owned and operated 33 jukeboxes throughout southwest Mississippi.

In the mid-1940s, O'Quinn obtained his mortician's license and opened a funeral home. He sold the jukebox routes and invested in real estate. The O'Quinns owned most of the properties in the Quarters, which was low-income housing for Blacks and essentially the ghetto of the small rural town of 1,200 people. They bought the

Whitaker Plantation on Highway 33 in the late 1940s and farmed the land, raising and selling peppers, soy beans and cotton.

On Sundays, O'Quinn went from one church to another selling burial policies, which a person could pay into and eventually meet the cost of his or her own burial. During these visits, he also organized benevolent associations, community groups that together paid into a fund for community members when they were in need.

"It was kind of a self-help group," explained Rance

O'Quinn, one of Samuel O'Quinn's sons, now 70, "but they later grew, and every time you organize people, others get suspicious."

The O'Quinns were, in fact, as well-to-do as anyone in Centreville, Black or white. The 11 O'Quinn children never had to work for whites, which was most unusual and an affront to the white supremacist mentality of the time.

On August 14, 1959, Samuel O'Quinn picked up his wife at their café, just off Main Street, as he did every night at 11:00 pm. That night, their 7-year-old son, Roy, was with Ida at the café. On the ride home, Roy stood between his parents on the front seat. As usual, O'Quinn stopped, got out of the car to open their front gate and then drove the car in. He was shot when he got back out of the car to shut the gate.

* * *

O'Quinn's children say their father became a target for murder because of rumors circulating about him. In 1957, O'Quinn had spent three weeks in Springfield, Massachusetts. The speculation in Centreville was that he had gone north to attend the NAACP convention.

Within a week of O'Quinn's murder, NAACP Mississippi Field Secretary Medgar Evers went to Centreville to investigate.

Centreville is in southwest Mississippi, an area notorious even in Mississippi for violence and unusually heavy Ku Klux Klan activity. An NAACP memo relayed Evers' findings: "Mr. O'Quinn [was] not a member of the NAACP nor an advocator of its program. He was not even a registered voter and, therefore, his murder was not really connected with political activities. Rather, it is believed he was murdered by someone interested in obtaining



COURTESY OF RANCE O'QUINN

Samuel O'Quinn, early 1950s

the valuable land which he owned on the highway [and] refused to sell despite numerous offers from white purchasers.”

It was all the more surprising then when, not long after Evers's visit, a plain white envelope arrived at the O'Quinns. In it, the family found an NAACP membership card for O'Quinn. The O'Quinns, however, don't believe that any whites could have known Samuel O'Quinn had joined the NAACP right before his death. “That's the irony of the whole situation,” said Rance. “His NAACP activities were very secretive. We didn't even know until afterwards that he was applying for membership.” His own wife did not know. But the rumors were there.

“There was no investigation,” Clarence O'Quinn said. “I didn't even know the name of the Sheriff of Wilkinson County until you told me. No one offered any expression of sympathy during our immediate bereavement,” he added. “I don't think anything was done.”

The only physical evidence that the O'Quinns recall was found were a couple of shells and a white glove, known to be a calling card of the White Citizens Council, at the spot where the gunman was thought to have stood.

In the days following the murder, a six-paragraph UPI article mentioned a letter, found on the O'Quinn farm,

saying, “Mr. Sam O'Quinn: You were too hard-headed. You wouldn't listen to reason and have been nothing but a troublemaker for the NAACP.” News reports also mentioned an unnamed white businessman who came forward claiming to have received a letter threatening O'Quinn, “purportedly from a local Negro...sent because 'white people might be blamed.'”

The O'Quinns actually now believe that a Black man murdered their father, but they suspect the killer was paid by whites to do the deed.

Several years after the murder, a friend of Samuel O'Quinn's started trying to contact Ida. The friend had cancer. He wanted Ida to come see him, but his condition worsened, and his children took him to Charity Hospital in New Orleans for treatment. One of the nurses there was from Centreville and knew the O'Quinns. She called Ida and said, “You should be down here. He's on his deathbed. He's saying that his finger on his right hand is the cause of Sam O'Quinn dying, that for \$500 and a car, he killed his best friend.” The man died before Ida could decide to travel to New Orleans.

. . .

Four months after the murder of Samuel O'Quinn, Mississippi State Sovereignty Commission investigator Zack J. Van Landingham paid a visit to the Wilkinson County Sheriff, J.T. Falkenheimer. “The sheriff said that ever since the killing of the Negro Sam O'Quinn,” Van Landingham reported, “there has been no activity on the part of the NAACP or the Negroes in that community.”

These were the regular rounds of a Sovereignty Commission investigator. The commission was an agency established by the Mississippi State Legislature in 1956 to monitor and oppose civil rights activity. The commission was disbanded in the 1970s, and its files were declassified in 1998 and are available online. The investigators went from town to town, gathering intelligence about civil rights activity from local officials, White Citizens Council members, paid informants and others. Investigators had specific people they inquired about. Whether or not the person in question actually was involved in the NAACP, if several city officials were asked about the activities of Samuel O'Quinn, the word got out that there was that suspicion.

According to the 1959 news reports, Sheriff Falkenheimer led the investigation into Samuel O'Quinn's murder. Now 84 years old, he still lives in Mississippi and says he doesn't remember the murder or even Samuel O'Quinn's name. “All that stuff is all behind me, and I'm looking forward to the future,” Falkenheimer said. He

“IF YOU LEAVE IT UP TO LOCAL PEOPLE, IT’S POLITICAL,” SAID RICHARD COLEMAN, PRESIDENT OF THE LAUDERDALE COUNTY NAACP, “AND THAT’S WHY A LOT OF THE MISSISSIPPI CASES HAVEN’T BEEN BROUGHT TO JUSTICE.”

could, however, be interviewed about his knowledge of the case by the FBI if it is reopened.

When the county’s current sheriff, Reginald Jackson, first took office in 1991, he was surprised to find that all previous sheriffs’ records were missing. The first Black sheriff in Wilkinson County, Jackson replaced Burnell McGraw, who had been sheriff since 1960. McGraw was a Klansman, according to a secret list of members in the files of former Mississippi Gov. Paul Johnson.

“They didn’t keep files here prior to 1970,” said District Attorney Ronnie Harper, and even with good evidence in hand, a modern-day investigation is out of the question for the D.A. “We have four lawyers and one investigator who does not have any law enforcement authority,” Harper said. “You really need something like the FBI involved; they’re the only ones who can dedicate officers to an investigation.”

* * *

In February 2006, the FBI and the Department of Justice began to actively examine unsolved civil rights-era murders to consider which cases could still be prosecuted. Though it is usually up to the state to bring murder charges, the FBI can have an assisting role. If it finds sufficient evidence to prosecute, “the Department of Justice will approach local jurisdictions,” said Steven Kodak, an FBI spokesman.

The FBI initiative began after Chip Burrus, former Assistant Director of the Criminal Investigative Division, received a letter in January 2006 about an old civil rights murder case. Burrus decided that if he was going to look at one such case, then he should see what else could be investigated. “It was the right thing to do,” he is often quoted as saying.

“An FBI man came to see my mother when my father was killed,” Rance said. “She wanted to know why couldn’t the FBI get involved. He said the information from the sheriff was that the killer went back into the interior of Mississippi, which would put it in the state’s hands.” Centreville straddles Amite and Wilkinson Counties, which both border Louisiana to the south. If the gunman had fled across the state line, the FBI could more easily have gotten involved. A Freedom of Information Act request to the FBI, made by the Southern Poverty Law Center concerning Samuel O’Quinn’s case did not return any records.

FBI spokesman Ernest J. Porter confirmed that

Samuel O’Quinn is one of the cold cases the FBI is assessing. Porter could not offer more information on the likelihood of a federal investigation. The Till Bill would provide a new infrastructure for federal involvement in state investigations of civil rights-era murders, but seeking state murder charges will still be left to state authorities unless the crime took place on federal land or involved kidnapping across state lines or other federal violations.

Brenda Jones, the communications director for Rep. John Lewis, who introduced the Till Bill, said, “The purpose of the Till Bill is to engage federal resources to encourage work on the local level, but we cannot mandate local and state action; it would be seen as over-reaching and not a function of the federal government. The bill must also take into account people who are not interested in pursuing these cases and will object to disruptions in the separation of powers.”

“If you leave it up to local people, it’s political,” said Richard Coleman, president of the Lauderdale County NAACP, “and that’s why a lot of the Mississippi cases haven’t been brought to justice.”

Derrick Johnson, president of the Mississippi state chapter of the NAACP, concurs. Recently, the FBI’s hate crimes report showed Mississippi as the only state without any reporting of hate crimes. “There are examples of cross burnings in several communities across the state,” Johnson said, “but the law enforcement agencies and the D.A.s have refused to adequately and accurately report such hate crimes. With that type of focus, they have no real interest in pursuing civil rights-era cases without some kind of thrust or motivation coming from the state or federal government.”

Recognizing these obstacles, the Mississippi NAACP has called on the state legislature to form its own special task force with powers to subpoena and indict. Johnson is not concerned about possible overlap between the state and federal cold case initiatives. “The more hands on deck, the better outcomes we can get in terms of solving these cases,” he said. ■

Benjamin Greenberg is author of the blog *hungryblues.net* and a member of the Editorial Collective of *Dollars & Sense* magazine. Some information in his article was drawn from the Paul B. Johnson Family Papers, McCain Library & Archives, University of Southern Mississippi.