
JIMMIE LEE & JAMES

TWO LIVES, TWO DEATHS, AND THE
MOVEMENT THAT CHANGED AMERICA

*“THIS IS THE STORY BEHIND THE HISTORIC 1965 VOTING
RIGHTS MARCH FROM SELMA TO MONTGOMERY.*

A well-written, well-reported page turner about our collective struggle for equality and justice ... hopefully
the last chapter in the American Revolution.” —MORRIS DEES, founder Southern Poverty Law Center

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OF CIVIC LEADERSHIP FOUNDATION

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To those who marched, and those still marching.

*It was the killing of **Jimmie Lee Jackson** that provoked the march from Selma to Montgomery. It was his death and his blood that gave us the Voting Rights Act of 1965.*

—CIVIL RIGHTS LEADER AND U.S.

REPRESENTATIVE JOHN LEWIS

*Dr. King's murder was the most momentous among those of the dozens who died in the cause of civil rights for African-Americans. While all could be said worthy of remembrance, one in particular—the **Rev. James Reeb**—may be worth recalling now, because the events surrounding his death helped hasten passage of the federal Voting Rights Act, a crowning achievement of the civil rights movement.*

—NEW YORK TIMES RELIGION JOURNAL

COLUMNIST GUSTAV NIEBUHR

CONTENTS

AUTHOR NOTE xi

PROLOGUE xiii

CHAPTER ONE **"I WAS HALF DEAD ANYWAY . . ."** 1

CHAPTER TWO **"I GOT HIM . . ."** 24

CHAPTER THREE **"WE ARE GOING TO SEE THE GOVERNOR!"** . . . 42

CHAPTER FOUR **"YOU AND THE TWO GIRLS ARE NEXT . . ."** . . 64

CHAPTER FIVE **"HOW DO YOU MURDER PEOPLE?"** 87

CHAPTER SIX **"THEY JUST FLUSHED OUT LIKE BIRDS . . ."** . 112

CHAPTER SEVEN **"ONE GOOD MAN . . ."** 136

CHAPTER EIGHT **"WE HAVE A NEW SONG TO SING . . ."** 157

CHAPTER NINE **“HE HAD TO DIE FOR SOMETHING . . .”** 180

CHAPTER TEN **“A MOST UNUSUAL OCCURRENCE . . .”** 193

CHAPTER ELEVEN **“HE’S GONNA HAVE TO GO TO JAIL . . .”** 218

CHAPTER TWELVE **“A DAGGER INTO THE HEART”** 236

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS 245

NOTES 247

INDEX 287

AUTHOR NOTE

Over the years, many award-winning journalists and respected scholars have written about the march from Selma, Alabama, to the state capital of Montgomery and the passage of the Voting Rights Act of 1965. As the fiftieth anniversary of these historical landmarks approached, we sought a fresh way to consider the movement that changed America. We eventually decided to focus on the foot soldiers of the day, the largely unknown men, women, and children who were willing to put their lives on the line to win the right to vote and, with that right, the opportunity to change their circumstances. Two of those individuals, Jimmie Lee Jackson and James Reeb, were killed within two weeks of each other. We believe that the lives and deaths of these two men are key elements in a powerful story about America and American justice, then and now.

To tell this story, we traveled to Selma, Montgomery, and nearby Marion to talk with many of the men and women who participated in the movement, and we interviewed dozens of others, including witnesses to the murders of Jackson and Reeb. We secured hundreds of pages of FBI documents, as well as private papers and diaries. We read memoirs and oral histories by civil rights leaders and lesser-known figures from the era, along with countless newspaper and magazine articles. Not surprisingly, the accounts of particular events from all these sources are often at odds with one another: People see things differently as

they happen; memories change over the years. We have striven to reconcile these different accounts and write a book that is as factually accurate as possible.

We have also worked to reconcile the struggle for racial justice during the tumultuous days of 1965 with contemporary events. Today, persistent poverty, unprecedented rates of incarceration, and access inequalities disproportionately afflict African Americans. As we wrote, protests over the use of excessive force by the police in the deaths of Michael Brown, Eric Garner, and many other African American men were widespread as the country stumbled into a new installment in the conversation about race, justice, and racial injustice.

Quieter but no less destructive developments are afoot. The same voting rights Jimmie Lee Jackson, James Reeb, and so many others struggled and even died to secure are now being undermined or undone.

It is our hope that this book can help us remember the great promise of American democracy—that everyone has a voice, that everyone can participate—and in honoring two of its heroes, recommit us to its promise.

PROLOGUE

“I don’t remember how many times I pulled the trigger, but I think I just pulled it once, but I might have pulled it three times. I don’t remember. I didn’t know his name at the time, but his name was Jimmie Lee Jackson. He weren’t dead. He didn’t die that night. But I heard about a month later that he died.”

—JAMES BONARD FOWLER

March 6, 2005

The *Anniston Star* is barely off the presses, and Michael Jackson’s phone is already ringing. *Did you see what Fowler said? What are you going to do about it? Can you reopen the case?*

Jackson has been in office for only two months, but as the first African American elected to serve as district attorney in the west-central Alabama jurisdiction that includes Selma and Marion, the town of 3,800 where state trooper James Bonard Fowler shot Jimmie Lee Jackson (no relation) forty years earlier, the forty-one-year-old prosecutor has heard the story of the death that changed the civil rights movement:

How, since the beginning of 1965, blacks in Selma and Marion, with the help of Dr. Martin Luther King and the Southern Christian Leadership Conference (SCLC), had intensified their efforts to win the right to vote.

How, on the night of February 18, 1965, state and local police turned off the streetlights in Marion and, along with deputized white citizens, attacked scores of men and women as they marched out of Zion United Methodist Church to peacefully protest the arrest of SCLC organizer James Orange.

How, in the chaos that followed, many were beaten as they knelt in prayer, while others hid under cars to avoid billy clubs and baseball bats, and still others sought refuge in nearby Mack's Café.

How, when one of those who had been in the church, Jimmie Lee Jackson, entered Mack's in search of his injured eighty-two-year-old grandfather, he saw his mother wrestling with an Alabama state trooper and rushed to her defense.

How the trooper shot Jimmie Lee in the stomach.

How Jimmie Lee ran out of the café and was immediately attacked by several white men, including, it was believed, other police.

How the wounded and beaten 26-year-old farmer and pulpwood chopper was left on the street to die.

How he was finally taken to a hospital in Marion and then to a hospital in Selma, where he passed away eight days later.

How Dr. King eulogized him at a funeral attended by thousands of outraged African Americans and a handful of whites.

How his death directly inspired the march from Selma to Montgomery for voting rights for blacks.

How, five months later, Congress passed one of the most important pieces of legislation in U.S. history, the Voting Rights Act of 1965.

And how, despite eyewitness testimony to the contrary, state and federal grand juries had accepted James Bonard Fowler's explanation that he had been acting in self-defense when he shot Jackson, and had refused to indict the trooper.

District Attorney Jackson also realizes that it is almost impossible to mount a case forty years after the fact. Witnesses are dead or impossible to find, or they no longer remember enough to be reliable. Documents, if there ever were any to begin with, are long gone. Potential jurors don't necessarily have the stomach to send an aging man to prison for something he may have done so many years earlier.

Still, Fowler's remarks are so offensive that they have reopened an old wound. It's not just that he reveals he never cared enough to inquire about the health of the man he shot. It's not that he boasts, "I don't think legally I could get convicted for murder now . . . 'cause after forty years there ain't no telling how many people is dead." No, speaking publicly for the first time since the shooting, the seventy-one-year-old retired trooper has shared deeper, darker thoughts with the *Star's* editor at large, John Fleming. His pronouncements include:

[Blacks] always fared better when they stayed in their place. . . . I think that segregation was good, if it were properly done. Now, you got to give equal funds and they got to be handled right. I don't believe in completely mixing the races. I don't think that is gonna help anything. . . .

I'm on the side of J. Edgar Hoover. I think [Martin Luther King] was a con artist. I don't think he's got a snowball's chance in hell of getting into heaven. No more chance than I do. His goal was to screw and fuck over every white woman that he could.

And so the district attorney fields calls from angry black leaders, including many state legislators; from ordinary citizens who remember the times when they could not vote and the police could get away with murder; and from relatives of Jimmie Lee Jackson who seek justice and closure.

Jackson tells them all that the odds are against gaining an indictment, but that he will try. Several years later, he will explain: "I can't emphasize enough the importance of the case. This was the murder that led to the strategy of the Selma–Montgomery March, and also the Bloody Sunday situation. So, but for Jimmie Lee Jackson's death who knows how things, history, could have been totally different."

A few weeks after the newspaper article appears, the district attorney drives the twenty-eight miles from his office in Selma, heading west on U.S. Route 80, then north up County Road 45 until he reaches Marion. Along with Selma and the state capital, Montgomery, the town is part of Alabama's "Black Belt," so named because of the color of the rich topsoil so amenable to farming, not the majority of its inhabitants, whose ancestors came to America on slave ships.

Marion is the seat of Perry County, whose chamber of commerce today proclaims, “If one word could describe Perry County, Alabama, that word would be Diversity! Its people, its land, its weather and its location are all balanced by the contrasts they provide.” According to the 2010 census, the town is about 64 percent black and 33 percent white. More than one-third of the population lives below the poverty line; the median household income is only \$24,000.

Originally inhabited by Choctaw Indians, the town was initially called Muckle Ridge in celebration of its first white settler. Four years later, in 1823, the name was changed to honor Revolutionary War hero Francis Marion, aka “the Swamp Fox.”

During the Civil War, Marion was a Confederate bastion. Indeed, the first Confederate flag was designed by a teacher at the Marion Female Seminary. So, too, was the traditional gray Confederate uniform.

Dr. King knew Marion well. His wife, Coretta Scott, grew up there, and the couple was married on her front lawn in 1953. Four years later the town gained international notoriety when an African American named Jimmy Wilson was sentenced to death for stealing \$1.95 from a white woman. The Alabama Supreme Court upheld the sentence. Bombarded with newspaper headlines and letters from around the world disparaging the United States and its justice system, Secretary of State John Foster Dulles successfully pressured Alabama’s governor, “Big Jim” Folsom, to grant Jimmy Wilson clemency.

Michael Jackson, who was just a year old when Jimmie Lee Jackson was shot, begins his quest for justice on a sidewalk by the town square. Zion United Methodist Church sits on the corner, across from the Perry County Courthouse. Nearby is the Lee and Rollins Funeral Home. In the funeral home’s parking lot,

where Mack's Café once stood, is a plaque bearing the likeness of Jimmie Lee Jackson in cap and gown and the inscription, "Gave his life in the struggle for the right to vote."

Without a list of witnesses or police files, the district attorney is starting not just at ground zero, but at square one. As older black people walk by, he politely stops them. "Excuse me," he says in a slow, deep drawl. "Do you know anything about the night that Jimmie Lee Jackson was shot?"