

Honor sought for trio slain in '64

Men's deaths fueled support for civil rights

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SCHWERNER



CHANEY



GOODMAN

On June 29, 1964, the FBI began distributing these pictures of civil rights workers, from left, Michael Schwerner, 24, of New York, James Chaney, 21, of Mississippi and Andrew Goodman, 20, of New York. The trio had disappeared near Philadelphia on June 21. / File photos/AP



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A push is underway to posthumously honor three civil rights workers a half century after the Ku Klux Klan executed them on a dark road in Mississippi.

For 44 days, FBI agents tromped through thickets, bogs and backwaters before finding the trio's bodies buried 15 feet beneath an earthen dam.

The June 21, 1964, deaths of James Chaney, Andrew Goodman and Mickey Schwerner fueled support for the civil rights movement and helped transform President Lyndon Johnson into a strong supporter, ending one speech with the words of the grass-roots anthem "We Shall Overcome."

In September, a Congressional Gold Medal honored the four girls killed in the Klan's 1963 bombing of a Birmingham church, and there is hope for a similar honor for the slain trio.

Second District U.S. Rep. Bennie Thompson said the trio deserves to be recognized. The Democratic congressman has spoken with some family members, who he says support his effort.

"With the 50th anniversary ... coming this summer, it would continue to signify this country's recognition and gratitude for the sacrifice they paid," said Thompson, who will be a co-sponsor of the measure.

Back then, Mississippi and other Southern states were failing to follow the Constitution that guaranteed rights to all Americans, and the trio were trying to do something about it, he said.

Chaney, Goodman and Schwerner became some of the most visible martyrs of the civil rights movement, and their FBI reward poster became an indelible image of the era.

News of their disappearances cast a pall over Freedom Summer workers training that summer of '64 in Oxford, Ohio, said historian John Dittmer.

“Every day (civil rights leader) Bob Moses would go up and write on the board, ‘They are still missing,’” said Dittmer, who wrote the 1994 book, “Local People.” “It was absolutely a wake-up call for the volunteers.”

They soon realized the three civil rights workers were dead.

“Everybody just assumed they would be the first of many,” Dittmer said. “I’m always amazed more weren’t killed.”

But it would take more than three years before anyone went on trial in the case.

In October 1967, a jury in Meridian heard the case against 18 men, who faced federal conspiracy charges.

The jury convicted seven, including Imperial Wizard Sam Bowers, but reputed Klan leader Edgar Ray Killen walked free after they deadlocked 11-1 in favor of his guilt. Jurors said the lone holdout told them she could “never convict a preacher.”

Mississippi authorities reopened the case in 1999 against Killen after The Clarion-Ledger published excerpts of an oral history interview with Bowers, who ordered the trio’s killings.

In that Mississippi Department of Archives and History interview that was supposed to have remained sealed until his death, Bowers said he was “delighted to be convicted and have the main instigator of the entire affair walk out of the courtroom a free man” — a reference to Killen.

In 2000, Jeffrey Goldberg, then a reporter for The New Yorker, drove to the home of Killen, who lives on the same road in Neshoba County where the three civil rights workers were slain.

Goldberg, who has interviewed terrorists from Hamas, Islamic Jihad and al-Qaida, wasn’t prepared when the 75-year-old Killen pointed his shotgun at him.

That happened moments after he said he mentioned to Killen that some local people were thinking about building a local memorial to

the slain civil rights workers.

He said Killen became enraged, saying, "A memorial? To who? The dead guys? Never! It'll never happen."

But the memorial did happen after a jury in 2005 convicted Killen of orchestrating the 1964 killings. A stretch of Mississippi 19 that runs from Philadelphia to Meridian now bears the names of the trio as does a historical marker — both of which have been repeatedly vandalized.

"Because there is a marker, it acknowledges what happened to the world," said Susan Glisson, executive director of the William Winter Institute for Racial Reconciliation. "It's easier to destroy than build up, but we're committed to the hard work of building up."

On Jan. 12, Killen, serving a 60-year sentence, will mark his 89th birthday behind bars. He won't be eligible for release until 2029.

According to testimony and FBI statements, Killen coordinated the events that night, meeting with Klansmen and having them intercept, kill and bury the bodies.

Schwerner's widow, Rita Bender, said the best honor Congress "could give to these men and all the others killed or injured in the struggle for voting rights and the dismantling of Jim Crow would be the reinstatement of the Voting Rights Act and its aggressive enforcement."

Goodman's brother, David, said he thinks "all the other 900 volunteers in Freedom Summer were heroes, too."