

Florence Latimer Mars: A Strong Voice Against Racial Injustice in Neshoba County, Mississippi (1923 – 2006)

Growing Up in Philadelphia

Born on January 1, 1923, Florence Latimer Mars was the only child of Adam Logino Mars, an attorney, and Emily Geneva (“Neva”) Johnson Mars, who both came from prosperous pioneer families with substantial land and timber holdings and deep roots in Neshoba County. A birth accident resulted in a short left leg, necessitating corrective surgery at the age of three. This mitigated some but not all of the effects of the accident; she walked with a slight limp for the remainder of her life.¹ Her father was addicted to morphine which led to his death from uremic poisoning when she was eleven. She had some fond memories of him, but in her formative years there was a distance that could not be overcome. Nor was she close to her mother, who remarried, so Mars spent considerable time with her paternal grandfather, William Henry Mars, whom she called “Poppaw.” As a child she rode with him to inspect his Neshoba landholdings (17,000 acres) that included timber, farmland, and houses rented to blacks and whites. Frequently, she and Poppaw would stop and visit at a house a black family rented and share a meal. She wondered how black families could be so generous, patient, and humorous despite their dire financial circumstances. She concluded, “it was faith in God and promise of a heavenly reward that was responsible for their good humor and patience.”² Years later she wondered if this was “a way of acting which was developed over the years by being in the position of a servant without money.”³

¹ Stanley Dearman, “Florence Mars,” in Joan H. Sadoff (ed), *Pieces from the Past: Voices of Heroic Women in Civil Rights* (Fullerton, CA: Tasora Publishing, 2011), 37.

² Ibid.

³ Florence Mars, *The Bell Returns to Mt. Zion* (Stribling Printing, Philadelphia, Mississippi, 1996), 54.

As a child during family dinner conversations she raised questions about how whites treated blacks in Neshoba County. She wondered how to reconcile claims of white superiority and segregation with the notion of Christian brotherhood and sending Christian missionaries to Africa to save “lost souls.” Her suggestion that “For Colored Only” signs were not right evoked strong family disapproval. Nonetheless, the idea of racial equality was planted in her childhood and would flourish over the years and inspire her to speak out years later against racial injustice and violence.⁴

She attended Philadelphia High School, where despite her height of barely five feet and a slightly shortened left leg, she learned to play tennis well enough to be on the school tennis doubles team. She also learned to play the clarinet and joined “Boots” Howell in forming a clarinet section in the high school band.⁵ In Sunday School at the First Methodist Church she troubled her teachers and friends with questions about segregation and Christian missionaries to Africa and the age of dinosaur bones compared to Biblical creation accounts. Despite her questions, she decided “not to rock the boat over race and religion and make trouble for myself.”⁶

After graduating from Philadelphia High School in May of 1940, Florence followed in the footsteps of her deceased father and enrolled in Millsaps College, a Methodist college in Jackson, where she met Betty Bobo, the daughter of a Delta cotton plantation owner. She and Betty were Methodists and immediately got along fine, eventually becoming lifelong friends (Betty referred to her as “Flossie,” a term of endearment). They both got involved in campus

⁴ Dearman, “Florence Mars,” 38.

⁵ Telephone interview with Boots Howell, Philadelphia, Mississippi, November 18, 2011

⁶ *The Bell Returns to Mt. Zion*, 28

activities, pledging the same sorority (Chi Omega), concentrating on making good grades, and playing tennis each day.⁷

Oxford and Atlanta (1942 – 1947)

At the beginning of her sophomore year at Millsaps, Betty had an appendectomy that forced her to drop out of college for a semester. However, Millsaps lacked sufficient faculty or students to repeat first semester courses in the second semester, so Betty decided to transfer to the University of Mississippi (Ole Miss) and persuaded Florence to come too so they could still be roommates.⁸ They found the Ole Miss environment more open than the Millsap campus with its emphasis on Biblical fundamentalism, including mandatory chapel attendance. They shared the same views about race, segregation, and religion, so they spent long hours reflecting on the challenges they faced in conforming to the expectations of parents, grandparents, and friends.

Mars increasingly struggled with the validity of Jim Crow laws. In her senior year at Ole Miss she once traveled by bus from Oxford to Pontotoc to board a train bound for New Orleans. The bus was packed and all “colored seats” were occupied. Seated in the last row before the sign “For Colored Only,” she said, “I ignored my intellect and followed the dictates of my conscience.”⁹ She invited a black woman loaded with packages to take the empty seat beside her. At first the woman declined, but at Mars’s insistence she sat down. Shortly, the bus came to a stop and the driver came to the seat, pulled the woman up, and yelled, “You know better than this.” The driver did not speak to Florence, who wanted to tell him that she, not

⁸ Ibid.

⁹ *The Bell Returns to Mt. Zion*, 30

the black woman, was at fault, but she did not.¹⁰ Embarrassed and humiliated, the woman moved to the back of the bus.

After graduating from Ole Miss, Bobo enlisted in the Marine Corps. Mars's physical handicap precluded military service, so she accepted a job at Delta Airlines in Atlanta, Georgia, where she worked in Reservations and provided logistical support for ferry pilots who moved airplanes across the country. Atlanta was much larger than Jackson, Mississippi and Memphis, Tennessee, two cities she had visited, and she enjoyed life in Atlanta because it was easy to catch a bus to go downtown to shop, to see a movie, or eat in a good restaurant, and she enjoyed visiting with friends and relatives when they came to Atlanta. Soon after the war in Europe ended she decided to return to Philadelphia.

Return to Philadelphia (1945 – 1950)

Twenty-two years old and back in Philadelphia, Mars went to work for the Neshoba County Welfare Office as a home visitor. This job took her into out-of-the-way homes that had few visitors and where no family member was employed. In some instances she visited aged white recipients whose children could have provided the modest assistance they needed, but the parents had deeded their land to the children to qualify for old-age assistance. She had little sympathy for this subterfuge, so after almost a year she resigned.

She began assisting Poppaw in managing some aspects of his large holdings of timberland, farmland, and rental housing. In 1947 her uncle died, and she took on the full-time task of working with her grandfather as he began disposing of this property. About this time Poppaw deeded to her a cotton farm that had some of the richest soil in Neshoba County,

¹⁰ Ibid.

which she decided to convert to a cattle farm where she could begin building a pure-bred Herford herd. In late December 1949 Poppaw became very ill and died three months later. Mars managed the settlement of his estate.

During these years she revived her interest in photography, a hobby that had been dormant since spending three summers in a camp in North Carolina as a teenager where she learned to develop and print negatives.¹¹ She purchased a Rollieflex camera and stocked a darkroom with photographic equipment and supplies so she could develop negatives and produce prints. She kept her camera in her car and took photographs as she drove around Neshoba County.

In the summer of 1950 she attended a painting class at an Ole Miss Summer Art School on the Mississippi Gulf Coast where she studied with artist Fred Conway of St. Louis, Missouri. She learned from Conway how to order her imaging through painting but quickly extrapolated this to ordering her imagination through her camera. In the fall of 1950 she relocated to New Orleans and found an apartment in the French Quarter. Shortly thereafter she met Ralston Crawford, a world traveler, noted abstract artist, lithographer, photographer, and jazz expert, who came to New Orleans from time to time to photograph the jazz scene. He became Mars's mentor in photographing jazz parades and acquiring more technical skill in composing photographs. She also attended exhibits of his paintings in New Orleans and New York City, all of which helped introduce her to a world that lay far beyond the confines of rural

¹¹ *The Bell Returns to Mt. Zion*, 28

Philadelphia.¹² She visited Crawford and his family in New York City several times and stayed in touch with him over the years, even acquiring some of his paintings.¹³

Another significant development occurred in New Orleans: she began psychotherapy sessions at Oschner's Clinic, which continued over the next three years. The sessions helped resolve some of her childhood conflicts, including her repression of thoughts and ideas about race and religion that had angered members of her family and her friends. Specifically, it helped her learn to follow thought processes to their logical conclusions and then stand firm on her conclusions. Later she observed the psychotherapy sessions had given her the strength and resolve to withstand the pressures of the Klan and others to conform to their expectations.¹⁴

Two years later she returned to Philadelphia with a clear sense purpose. She would follow Fred Conway's advice to "follow the things close to your heart" by using her cameras to document day-to-day life of blacks in Neshoba County. Many of these photographs were of black children playing or picking cotton and adults working, relaxing, napping, eating at family and community events, and socializing at houses and churches.¹⁵ On one occasion she took photographs of each step in a "hog killing" by Frank Davis, the husband of Gertrude Davis, her domestic help.¹⁶ It was during this period she began using her camera as if it were an extension of her eyes. This was especially manifested in the darkroom. She said, "Sometimes I spent more than a day with one negative, working on one face, trying to get the results I wanted."¹⁷

¹² *The Bell Returns to Mt. Zion*, 42.

¹³ Dawn Lee Chalmers, Pascagoula, Mississippi to Charles Dollar, Email, December 5, 2014.

¹⁴ *The Bell Returns to Mt. Zion*, 42. The psychotherapy sessions must have been a very private matter for Mars because Lynn Eden, who lived in the same house with her for more than year while working on the *Witness in Philadelphia* manuscript, recalled years later that Mars never mentioned the sessions to her.

¹⁵ *Florence Mars, Witness in Philadelphia* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1977), 59.

¹⁶ *The Bell Returns to Mt. Zion*, 54.

¹⁷ *The Bell Returns to Mt. Zion*, 55.

The murder and trial of the killers of Emmett Till in late summer of 1955 further reinforced her sense of injustice that blacks in Mississippi endured. Fourteen-year-old Emmett Till from Chicago was visiting relatives in Tallahatchie County when he was alleged to have flirted with a young white woman. Subsequently, two white men kidnapped him from his relatives' home. Several days later his decomposed body was pulled from the Tallahatchie River. The two kidnappers, who made little secret of what they had done, were arrested and charged with Till's murder.

The trial was set to take place in Sumner, Mississippi, a small town in Tallahatchie County where Till's body was discovered. Mars's college roommate, Betty Bobo, now married to William Pearson, a large cotton plantation owner near Sumner, invited her to come to Sumner and attend the trial with her. Community mores in small Mississippi towns dictated that ladies were not supposed to show an interest in such matters as a murder trial where "You will hear things that no white lady should hear."¹⁸ However, they ignored all of this and attended all five days of the trial.¹⁹ This is another incident in which Mars symbolically thumbed her nose at a culture dictating her behavior.

In 1957 the Neshoba County Livestock Auction Sale came on the market and Mars purchased it to complement her cattle farm. She thought she needed an investment someone else could manage for her while she was out of Neshoba County.

¹⁸ Betty Pearson, "Betty Pearson," in *Pieces from the Past*, 26.

¹⁹ Betty Pearson got "press passes" for them through a friend of her husband. Dearman, "Florence Mars," 46.

New Orleans and Europe

After the 1954 Supreme Court decision, *Brown v. Board of Education*, the rising tide of militant white racism, emergence of the Citizens Council, and state funding of the Sovereignty Commission troubled her greatly, so she began spending more time in New Orleans where she continued her photographic work. She lived in the French Quarter for several months and took numerous photographs of marching bands in the city. In the summer of 1957 she joined an eight-week tour of Europe organized under the auspices of the Art Department of the University of Alabama. The tour expanded her understanding and appreciation of a world that lay beyond Neshoba County and further nurtured her growing concerns about a pending crisis in race relations in Mississippi.

In the fall of 1959 she enrolled in a photography night class at Newcombe College, a part of Tulane University. Class participation included access to a darkroom in one of the college buildings. After a few weeks she moved to New Orleans and rented an apartment near St. Charles Avenue and began taking photographs of night life in the French Quarter and developing and printing negatives in the college darkroom. In her work as a volunteer with the Jazz Project at the Tulane University Library, she sometimes took William "Bill" Russell, the foremost expert on New Orleans jazz, (who did not drive) to various locations across the city that sometimes included visits to the homes of early musicians. She always had two or three cameras with her, so she took many photographs and developed the negatives and produced the prints the next day.

It was during this time in New Orleans that she got involved in the creation of Preservation Hall because she attended impromptu performances and took photographs. By

this time her skills in composition along with her expertise in developing and printing negatives were being recognized. In the midst of urban expansion, New Orleans was destroying old, historic buildings, so Mars was commissioned to take photographs of these houses and neighborhoods. Later she said taking these pictures and developing negatives and prints gave her a profound sense of satisfaction which enabled her to “forget about the uproar back in Neshoba County over the race issue. . . .”²⁰

In the summer of 1962 she and a friend traveled by car through six European countries trying, as she put it, to focus on exploring “the roots of the Western Civilization without any thoughts of Mississippi.”²¹ However, in early October she saw the front page of an Italian newspaper with a picture of the Lyceum on the Ole Miss campus and the word “morte,” so she knew someone had been killed but did not know who or why. Several days later, while in Greece, she learned about “The Riot at Ole Miss,” but she tried to put this news “in the back of her mind and get on with the exploration of the wonders of the World.”²² By late November she was back in New Orleans.

Return to Philadelphia (1962 – 1964)

Upon her return to New Orleans she concluded that being an absentee owner of a cattle farm and stockyard was not working well, so she decided to return to Philadelphia to take

²⁰ *The Bell Returns to Mt. Zion*, 55.

²¹ *The Bell Returns to Mt. Zion*, 59.

²² *The Bell Returns to Mt. Zion*, 55

²² *The Bell Returns to Mt. Zion*, 59.

²² *Ibid.*

personal charge of her business enterprise, a cattle farm and stockyard sales lot. In January 1963 she relocated permanently to Philadelphia.

With photography still an important part of her life, she planned to continue using her camera as she drove through Neshoba County, taking pictures of people and scenes of interest to her, especially those relating to Blacks. However, she found something had changed and she no longer derived the same level of satisfaction from photography. The easy relationship many white people had with black people was becoming a relic of the past. These whites quit talking with blacks they met on the streets lest someone think they were supporting integration.²³ Much of this, she thought, could be explained by white militants who were committed to the preservation of white supremacy and the suppression of any action or view that deviated from it.

Offsetting this development was her new interest in the First Methodist Church. Since graduating from Ole Miss, she had little interest in organized religion. However, on one of her trips to Philadelphia she had met Rev. John Cooke, pastor of First Methodist Church. Through conversations with him she developed a renewed interest in religion and began participating in the activities of the church. Inspired by the January 1963 “Born of Conviction” statement of twenty-eight Mississippi Methodist ministers who reaffirmed their “belief in the brotherhood of man, freedom of the pulpit, unalterable opposition to the closing of public schools, and

²³ Unpublished “Class of 64,” Historical Documentary Video, Philadelphia, Mississippi (Andy Yates, Los Angeles, 1974), in possession of the author.

unflinching antagonism to Communism,"²⁴ she decided to add her voice to other voices of reason and moderation in the Methodist Church in Mississippi.

Soon she was invited to become the teacher of the Women's Bible class on Sunday mornings. Initially, she found teaching the Bible class very satisfying, reading widely to supplement church literature. But she also found it frustrating because no one in the class, or the church for that matter, seemed interested in talking about race relations in Neshoba County, the murder of Medgar Evers, or the four Negro girls who were killed by a bomb in their Birmingham, Alabama church.

Disappearance of Three Civil Rights Workers in Philadelphia (1964 – 1965)

By the beginning of 1964 it was widely recognized that the Ku Klux Klan was burning crosses in Mississippi. In Neshoba County alone twelve crosses were burned simultaneously. The Neshoba County sheriff reported that outsiders had burned the crosses but had left before law officials could apprehend them. In March the Council of Federated Organizations (COFO) announced it would send workers to Neshoba County to organize a voter registration drive for black voters. Several weeks later COFO workers Michael Schwerner and James Chaney were in the Mt. Zion community to begin planning for a voter registration drive and a Freedom School. A community meeting was held at the Mt. Zion United Methodist Church. After a few days Chaney and Schwerner returned to Meridian.

²⁴ These 28 ministers, most of whom were under forty years of age, believed that clergy had a responsibility for leadership in race relations. In their view the failure of Bishop Marvin Freeman and the Leadership of the Mississippi Southern Conference to address race relations after the Ole Miss Riot left a leadership void they attempted to fill with their statement. See Joseph T. Reiff, "Conflict of Convictions in White Mississippi Methodists: The 1963 'Born of Conviction,'" *Methodist History*, 49:3 (April 2011), 161-175.

On June 16 a group of white men in several vehicles drove to the Mt. Zion Church, viciously beat up several members, and then set the church on fire. Schwerner, who was attending a COFO meeting in Oxford, Ohio, learned of this and immediately drove back to Meridian with the intent of visiting Mt. Zion to obtain more information. Andrew Goodman, a recent recruit, came with him. On Sunday afternoon, June 21, Schwerner, Goodman and Chaney drove to Mt. Zion to investigate the burning of the church. During their return they drove through Philadelphia, where Deputy Sheriff Cecil Price pulled over the station wagon Chaney was driving. He arrested the driver for speeding and arrested Goodman and Schwerner for investigation into the church burning. They were taken to the county jail and after Chaney paid a fine of \$20.00 they were released around 10:30 PM and told to get out of the county. Deputy Sheriff Price said he last saw the car headed south on Highway 19. The three never made it back to Meridian. Three days later their abandoned, burned out station wagon was discovered twelve miles north of Philadelphia; the three COFO workers were missing.

Most whites in Neshoba concluded the absence of bodies meant this was a hoax; they had staged their disappearance to make Neshoba County look bad. They now linked the burning of Mt. Zion Church as part of this "hoax." Mississippi Congressman Arthur Winstead, whose hometown was Philadelphia, informed his House colleagues on June 25, "It is the belief of many prominent citizens that this instance is part of a plan to discredit the State of Mississippi Even the church burning, some people believe, may be a hoax."²⁵

In early July Mars drove to Meridian with her friend Iris Turner Kelso, who grew up in

²⁵ 110 *Cong. Rec.* 14997-14998 (1964).

Neshoba County and was now a reporter for the New Orleans *States-Item*. Kelso was covering the disappearance of the three civil rights workers, and she wanted to go to Meridian to investigate the discovery of a torso in the Mississippi River might be that of James Chaney. Mars volunteered to drive Kelso to the Meridian COFO office. Curious about COFO, she went into the office with her friend, who learned the torso was not that of Chaney. Unbeknownst to Florence, the Klan had the COFO office under surveillance and reported her presence at the office. Several days later she learned of rumors she was attending COFO meetings in Meridian. After that she discovered she was under daily Klan surveillance in Philadelphia.²⁶

In the meantime, teams of FBI agents were in Philadelphia investigating whether or not the Klan had murdered the three civil rights workers. Almost without exception, residents of Philadelphia refused to cooperate with the FBI agents. One exception was Mars's Aunt Ellen Spendruff, who was "tough, outspoken, [and] afraid of nothing"²⁷ and invited FBI agents to visit her in her home where she told them there were a few people in Philadelphia willing to talk with the FBI. Several days later two FBI agents came to talk with Mars. In speaking with local business leaders about the possible connection between the disappearance of the three civil rights workers and the Klan, Mars realized no one wanted to publicly challenge Klan leadership, which she believed included Sheriff Lawrence Rainey and his deputy, Cecil Ray Price. Furthermore, some people who rejected the disappearance of the three civil rights workers as a hoax were afraid to say so, because "if you said 'it's not a hoax' that put you on the side of COFO."²⁸

²⁶ *Witness in Philadelphia*, 101 – 102.

²⁷ Dearman, "Florence Mars," 43.

²⁸ An Oral History with Miss Florence Mars, Native Mississippi Author," The Mississippi Oral History Program of the University of Southern Mississippi (1981), 34.

The FBI continued its extensive search for the missing civil rights workers, now presumed dead. Based upon tips received from an award of \$25,000 for information leading to the discovery of the bodies of the three civil rights workers, the FBI began excavation of a recently built earthen dam several miles west of Philadelphia. On August 4, the FBI found the bodies of Michael Schwerner, Andrew Goodman, and James Chaney buried under fifteen feet of dirt at the new dam.

Although this discovery jolted many Neshoba County residents who believed the civil rights workers' disappearance was a hoax, it did not change the prevailing view that COFO was the underlying cause for violence in the community. When COFO boldly decided to send more civil rights workers to Philadelphia, the Klan organized an effort to drive out COFO by bringing economic pressure on and physically intimidating any black Philadelphian COFO supporters. Seeking community endorsement, the Klan leadership organized a closed meeting in the county courthouse on August 17.

Mars, Aunt Ellen, three other women, two preachers, and two businessmen decided to attend. As the women entered and moved to the back of the room it became totally silent; the presence of the five women was unexpected and unwelcomed. Nonetheless, they were allowed to stay. The ensuing discussion included proposals to prepare a list of local "Negroes who were aiding and abetting COFO" and circulate it to all businesses in Philadelphia. Anyone whose name was on the list would be denied credit and if working would be immediately fired.²⁹ Aunt Ellen surreptitiously took notes of the proposals, discussion, and decisions by pretending to make entries in her checkbook register which she planned to hand over to the

²⁹ *Witness in Philadelphia*, 116.

FBI.³⁰ The meeting concluded with the chairman's admonition that all of the decisions made should not be discussed outside the meeting.

In mid-September Mars learned the FBI had no eyewitnesses to support indictments for the murders, but it had identified twenty-one instances of prosecutable police brutality. FBI Inspector Joe Sullivan told her Robert Owen, the Justice Department attorney handling the grand jury hearings, needed the testimony of "responsible white citizens" to challenge the testimony that Sheriff Lawrence Rainey was a "fine sheriff" and there were no racial problems in Neshoba County until the Council of Federated Organizations "persuaded Negroes to tell lies."³¹ Subpoenas were served on Aunt Ellen and Mars to testify at a federal grand jury hearing in Biloxi, which they did on Thursday, October 1. Later Mars reported she described the courthouse meeting and when asked about Sheriff Rainey's reputation in dealing with Negroes she stated ever since the sheriff took office in January 1964 there had been constant stories of police brutality circulating both in the black and white communities.³²

The next day back in Philadelphia, Mars went to her stockyard and was outraged to learn the Klan knew about her testimony in Biloxi. One of her employees reported Klan members told him that she "had testified against our folks down at the grand jury" and that she was working for COFO. A livestock buyer from Tennessee informed her Klan members told him they were organizing a boycott against sales at the stockyard to close it down. She tried to fight back, but Klan members stopped truck drivers delivering livestock to the stockyard and told them the stockyard was closed. She asked her first cousin, Mont Mars for advice about

³⁰ Dearman, "Florence Mars," 44.

³¹ *Witness in Philadelphia*, 133.

³² *Witness in Philadelphia*, 135.

what she should do. A recent graduate of the University of Mississippi School of Law, he told her he believed the Klan's boycott efforts probably would succeed. In apparent agreement with others in the community who believed she had "broken the rules," he added, "You've been asking for trouble and now you've got it."³³ Several months later she found a non-Klan buyer and sold the stockyard at a loss. Later, after hearing threats the Klan planned to poison her purebred Hereford cattle, she sold the farm and the cattle.

She learned of rumors circulating among friends that she worked for COFO. Indignant that anyone would think that she had so little sense of community concerns she would actually work for COFO, much less be a member, she also was outraged to learn that Clarence Mitchell, a prominent member of the First Methodist Church, was telling church members and others that her testimony before the federal grand jury in Biloxi made her a "traitor to the community" and that he would see to it that she paid for it.³⁴

Turmoil in First Methodist Church (1964 – 1966)

As noted earlier, Mars taught the Women's Bible Class at the First Methodist Church. Several weeks after Rev. Lee's arrival in Philadelphia in June 1964, he asked her to lead the senior Methodist Youth Fellowship (MYF), which met on Sunday evenings. She agreed to this but with the proviso, "I'm not just going to take that class if I can't feel free to teach and bring out whatever I can on whatever subjects we might want to have in open and free discussion." Rev. Lee assured her this was okay; "That is exactly why I wanted you to have it."³⁵

During the spring of 1965 some of the community and church hostility toward her

³³ *Witness in Philadelphia*, 138.

³⁴ *Witness in Philadelphia*, 140.

³⁵ "An Oral History with Miss Florence Mars," 47.

subsided, but it erupted again after a COFO memorial parade on June 21, 1965, the anniversary of the Chaney, Goodman, and Schwerner murders. Mars's maternal grandfather was very ill, and the family hired a black nurse from the Mt. Zion community to tend to his needs. The usual practice was for a family member to drive to Mt. Zion and bring the nurse back to her grandfather's house where she would work fourteen days and then be off for three days. On the date of the COFO memorial parade it was Mars's turn to make the run. She drove her familiar 1962 Volkswagen out to Mt. Zion while the parade was still in process, but the highway patrol stopped traffic for a few minutes and then allowed the cars to follow behind the parade. Deputy Sheriff Cecil Price saw Mars and reported to the sheriff's office she was part of the parade. Within an hour or so the rumor that she was in the parade was viral in Philadelphia and some church members once again questioned if she should be teaching the Women's Bible Class.

Mars's troubles continued to mount. The First Methodist Church was across the street from the county jail, and during a discussion with the MYF, she asked if they remembered what happened there a year ago. Everybody remembered, and when she asked why the civil rights workers were killed, several class members said it was because of their ideas. Picking up on a theme discussed the previous week she observed, "Well, you couldn't really say that this is the same thing as killing six million Jews, but there are some similarities."³⁶ The parents of some of the MYF members were infuriated when they learned of this discussion because they did not want their children to hear about the killings and even more so discuss them, especially in the context of the Holocaust.

³⁶ "An Oral History with Miss Florence Mars," 48.

A month or so later on during the Neshoba County Fair, Mars attended a party at the fairgrounds where alcohol was served. She was observed having two drinks, and when she got into her car and started to drive home, Neshoba County Sheriff Lawrence Rainey arrested her for drunk driving. The arrest enraged her because she was not drunk, and witnesses at the party could testify that she had only two drinks. There were many other people who drank alcohol that night at the party, but she was the only one arrested. Eventually, the drunk driving charge was dropped, but the damage was done. Her old foe, Clarence Mitchell, soon was asserting that Mars was not fit to teach the Women's Bible Class or MYF and that the church should ask her to resign. He told Rev. Lee her participation in church affairs was like "putting shit in homemade ice cream."³⁷ She offered to resign, but Rev. Lee urged her to stay the course, saying he would not want to be at the church if she resigned.

A Philadelphia, Mississippi to Philadelphia, Pennsylvania Project imbroglio culminated in Mars's resignation in May 1966 as teacher of the Women's Bible Class and leader of the MYF. Rudi Gelsey, pastor of the Unitarian-Universalist Church of the Restoration in Philadelphia, PA, wanted to establish a "sister to sister city" exchange program to improve racial relations in Philadelphia, MS. In January 1965 Gelsey visited Philadelphia, MS to meet with blacks and whites who might be interested in attending a seminar to develop plans for an exchange program. Among the people he visited were Rev. Clinton Collier (a black pastor of a Methodist Church in Neshoba County), who had the reputation of being "the most militant Negro in the county,"³⁸ and Rev. Clay Lee, pastor of the First Methodist Church.

³⁷ "Class of 64".

³⁸ *Witness in Philadelphia*, 197.

Rev. Lee, Rev. Collier, and several other blacks attended the seminar in May of 1965 that discussed several initiatives, including the promotion of “open and equal communication between whites and Negroes of Neshoba County.”³⁹

Several months later Rev. Clay received a copy of a brochure the Pennsylvania group had produced to solicit funding for the project. He showed it to Mars and they agreed its condescending tone, missionary zeal, and prominent mention of the three murders along with two pictures, one a picture of a shack and another of a black and white child playing together would kill the project. They revised the brochure to one page, deleting the condescending tone, the reference to three murders, and the two pictures.

In the meantime, a Philadelphia-to-Philadelphia working session and banquet were scheduled for January 1966. Three whites, Mars, Rev. Lee, and Mr. Robert Carley Peebles, and several blacks, including Rev. Collier, attended the conference and banquet. Mr. Peebles (1892 – 1977), a well-respected businessman, civic leader, and current president of the Philadelphia Chamber of Commerce, delivered the keynote speech, “One Government – One Bible – One People,”⁴⁰ in which he declared “that the rule of law is perhaps the greatest achievement in the long struggle for liberty, and if that is lost, liberty is lost; that the use of orderly, ‘due process’ to change the laws is essential for an orderly society.”⁴¹ His speech was not an explicit denunciation of the Klan, but to many residents of Neshoba County the message was clear. The Philadelphia Chamber of Commerce demanded Peebles issue a statement saying his speech did not represent the views of the Chamber. He refused.

³⁹ Quoted in *Witness in Philadelphia*, 202.

⁴⁰ Copy in possession of the author, courtesy of his daughter, Sarah Howell, Philadelphia, Mississippi.

⁴¹ Ibid.

The only project the Mississippi delegation and the Pennsylvania delegation could agree on was a student exchange program. Initially, the plan was that six white students would come to Philadelphia, three would stay in white homes and three in black homes. Eventually, this was reduced to two white students who would stay in white homes. When the two students arrived in Philadelphia at the beginning of Easter Week, they brought with them copies of the revised brochure with the intention of passing them out to various groups. Unfortunately, local police had discovered copies of the old, unrevised brochure in the car of Rev. Clinton Collier during a routine traffic stop earlier and now they were being circulated in the community. Rev. Collier was associated with COFO, so Rev. Lee and Mars knew that whites in Neshoba County would conclude the Philadelphia to Philadelphia Project was a front for civil rights and COFO and that they were working in its behalf. This gave rise to renewed efforts to oust Mars from teaching the Women's Bible Class. Under pressure from their husbands, members of the class sought her resignation because they did not want to be connected with "Communist civil rights agitation."⁴² This time Rev. Clay agreed she should resign from teaching the Women's Bible Class and leading the Methodist Youth Fellowship. On April 24, 1966, she submitted her resignation.

Rebuilding Mt. Zion, 1964 – 1966)

Shortly after Mt. Zion Church was burned, a fundraising effort to rebuild the church began. A Mississippi Committee of Concern headed by Rev. William P. Davis, a white Baptist Minister from Jackson, pledged \$5,000 with no restrictions. The national Methodist Board of Missions pledged \$8,000 but required the church to pay a \$400 processing fee, which it did not

⁴² *Witness in Philadelphia*, 203.

have. Mars contacted a number of people she knew and raised the \$400. The First Methodist Church agreed to support rebuilding of the church and established a Building Fund Committee. She thought this was a good indication that church people in Philadelphia community were willing to move away from its implicit support of the Klan.⁴³ Unfortunately, this initiative withered away because the First Methodist Church Building Fund Committee insisted its support was contingent on Mt. Zion agreeing the new “building would never be used for anything other than church activities.”⁴⁴ Unwilling to surrender control of its church activities to the white community, Mt. Zion church refused this offer of financial support. The new church building, which was dedicated to the memories of Schwerner, Goodman, and Chaney in February 1966, was completed without any significant public support from the white community of Neshoba County.

Martin Luther King in Philadelphia (1965)

In mid-June 1966 Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. came to Philadelphia to participate in the second memorial march commemorating the deaths of Goodman, Chaney, and Schwerner. As Dr. King led 150 people to the courthouse square where he intended to make a brief speech, a crowd of white hecklers yelled and screamed at him and tried to prevent him from speaking. Mars later recounted that she was standing at the courthouse as the marchers began their return to Independence Quarter and was stunned as she saw whites she knew throwing rocks and bottles at King and the marchers.⁴⁵ The local police made no effort to control the mob as it became more violent, especially as Klansmen encouraged others to throw rocks or to attack the

⁴³ *Witness in Philadelphia*, 178 – 179.

⁴⁴ *Witness in Philadelphia*, 180.

⁴⁵ *Witness in Philadelphia*, 207.

marchers with their fists and clubs. All the while she remained on the square, silent and holding high an American flag as an eloquent message “this is not America.” Dick Molpus, who was fourteen-years-old at the time, recalled later that “ Florence Mars stood regally on the court square, holding a huge American flag straight out in front of her with both hands, pushing it as far forward as she could. She didn’t flinch, or look one way or the other, just stared straight ahead.”⁴⁶

The Trial (1966 - 1968)

The trial of the men indicted in the murder of the three civil rights workers had been on hold while government attorneys appealed Judge Harold Cox’s dismissal of most of the charges. In In March 1966 the U.S. Supreme Court unanimously reversed his decisions. However, procedural issues delayed the trial until October 9, 1967. The trial was conducted in Meridian, and Mars and Aunt Ellen attended all sessions.

To the shock of most whites in Neshoba County, on October 19, 1967, an all-white jury of five men and seven women found eight of the defendants guilty and acquitted twelve others. Ku Klux Klan leader Edgar Ray “Preacher” Killen, an ordained Baptist minister, was acquitted even though there was corroborative testimony that he planned the murders. The jury was dead-locked 11 to 1 on Killen’s conviction, the one holdout being a woman who said she could never convict a preacher.

Witness in Philadelphia (1965 – 1977)

In the aftermath of the white community’s acceptance of rumors that Mars was a COFO supporter and her trumped-up arrest for drunken driving in the summer of 1965, she began

⁴⁶ Quoted in Donna Ladd, “In Memory of Florence Mars, 1923 – 2006,” Jackson *Free Press*, May 3, 2006.

thinking about setting things right for her own peace of mind. Rev. Lee asked if she had ever thought about writing a book. She told him, “No, I can’t write, Clay. I can talk but I can’t write.”⁴⁷ He suggested she buy a tape recorder and begin recording her recollections of events over the past two years. She followed his advice, and started recording her recollections, transcribing the recordings into typed notes. She continued this over the next year and a half and finished a first rough draft in December 1967. She asked Turner Catledge, managing editor of *The New York Times*, who had grown up in Philadelphia with her mother, to read the draft and he told her the draft contained marvelous things and advised her to continue working on it. She followed his advice and over the next year or so she produced multiple drafts. In addition, she decided to explore the history of the Mt. Zion community and began researching county land records to understand how the community came into being after slaves were freed. There were so many unanswered questions that she began recording interviews with residents of the Mt. Zion community.⁴⁸

A major problem Mars encountered with the drafts was that she did not want to use footnotes because they involved looking up “all of this dull stuff.”⁴⁹ Several reviewers of the manuscript advised her that readers would not necessarily believe what she wrote just because she said it. With considerable reluctance, she began documenting some parts of her draft based on issues of *The Neshoba Democrat* and *The New York Times*. At this point, Lynn Eden,⁵⁰ a recent graduate of the University of Michigan and author of a forthcoming book based on her

⁴⁷ Ibid.

⁴⁸ *The Bell Returns to Mt. Zion*, 64.

⁴⁹ *Oral History*, 82.

⁵⁰ Email from Lynn Eden, December 13, 2014.

senior thesis, joined the project. From January 1972 until the summer of 1973 she stayed in Mars's house and worked with her in reorganizing the structure of the manuscript, recommending revisions, identifying places where documentation was required, and then locating the appropriate source. Although Elder was listed on the title page as "with the assistance of Lynn Elder," she rewrote most of the manuscript.⁵¹ The Louisiana State University Press accepted it and it was published in August 1977 as *Witness in Philadelphia*. It was an Alternative Selection in the Book of the Month Club and received praise in numerous book reviews.⁵² More than 500 copies were sold in Philadelphia alone, but Mars thought most people probably either rejected her description of events during these years or wanted to forget this past, believing nothing could come of stirring up these matters. In fact, she noted in 1977, "Neshoba County whites are still hostile to any references made to the three civil rights workers and resentful that the press brings the murders up every time anything is written about the community."⁵³

After *Witness in Philadelphia* (1977 – 2006)

In the 1980s as Neshoba County moved closer to the racial tolerance and moral and political commitment to equality and social justice Mars exemplified, the controversy that had swirled around her in the 1960s faded away. Now in her 60s, she still drove her old Volkswagen Beetle and continued to be active in the community. She attended the Twenty-fifth Anniversary

⁵¹ Ibid.

⁵² In a book review John Taylor praised the book as "a detailed documented, yet personal account of the upheaval that shook Neshoba County, Mississippi, when the civil rights movement began to make itself felt in the early 1960s." He added, "It is nevertheless clear that the risks she ran were entirely real and could have turned out very badly indeed. What sustained her was intelligence and courage, . . ." *The Nation*, December 3, 1977, 597 – 598.

⁵³ *Witness in Philadelphia*, 281.

of the murders of Schwerner, Chaney, and Goodman in 1989 where she heard Mississippi Secretary of State Dick Molpus, a resident of Philadelphia, apologize for the murders on behalf of the community.⁵⁴ She was pleased that in 2004 the Philadelphia Coalition, a multi-racial organization committed to racial reconciliation in Neshoba County, rose Phoenix-like from the ashes of the Philadelphia to Philadelphia Project. Doubtless, she derived great pleasure in seeing her second cousin, Dawn Lea Chalmers, become an active member of the coalition.

She continued her research and writing. In 1995 she published *The Lake Place Burnside Family History: a Neshoba County history*,⁵⁵ which was followed by *The Bell Returns to Mt. Zion* in 1996. The latter is a revealing self-portrait of the complexity of her aspirations and contradictions. It is a stream-of-consciousness narrative in which she explores her own evolving self-awareness, the emotional conflicts she had with her father and his brother William, both of whom were addicted to morphine, and her relations with blacks in Neshoba County. In addition, she traced her growth as an artist in the darkroom as she rendered prints that extended the camera as her eye. Equally as important is that, like Georgian Lillian Smith, author of *Killers of the Dream* (1949), she had to write “because I had to find out what life in a segregated culture had done to me, one person; I had to put down on paper these experiences so that I could see their meaning for me.”⁵⁶ Her last publication was *The fair: a personal history*

⁵⁴ Later in his campaign in the 1985 gubernatorial election, his Republican rival, Kirk Fordyce, used this apology against him in an oblique reference, “Never apologize! Never look back! Forward Together!” Rev. Ed King and Trent Watts, *Ed King’s Mississippi: Behind the Scenes of Freedom Summer* (Jackson: University Press of Mississippi, 2014), 24.

⁵⁵ Florence Mars, *The Lake Place Burnside family history: a Neshoba County history* (Stribling Printing, Philadelphia, Mississippi, 1995).

⁵⁶ Quoted in *The Bell Returns to Mt. Zion*, 87.

(2001), a booklet about the Neshoba County Fair which she dedicated to her mother, who had died in 1998.

By 2000 Mars had become less active because of palsy, diabetes, and heart issues. Her health gradually declined to the point where she was in a wheelchair most of the time. Despite this, she enjoyed one last hurrah when justice finally caught up with Edgar Ray Killen in 2005. A state grand jury indicted him on three counts of murder. In early June the trial opened in Philadelphia and she was there. Stanley Dearman, the retired editor of *The Neshoba Democrat*, wrote that while spectators were quietly waiting for the trial to begin:

They suddenly became aware of a voice outside the courtroom talking nonstop. The door in the back of the room opened and Florence, still talking, was wheeled in by two attendants. One thing she was heard to say was “I’ve been with this case too long to miss this.”⁵⁷

She was in the courtroom the day the jury delivered a guilty verdict on all three counts.

Florence Latimer Mars died on April 23, 2006. Stanley Dearman, the retired Editor and Publisher of the *Neshoba Democrat* and long-time friend, had the last word. At her funeral service he noted that many people who lived in Neshoba County during the 1950s and 1960s now acknowledged that Florence was right all along, but they had forgotten what they said and did more than four decades earlier.⁵⁸

⁵⁷ Dearman, “Florence Mars,” 45.

⁵⁸ Dearman, “Florence Mars,” 47.