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“An Atmosphere of Fear”: One Man’s Death in the Civil Rights Struggle in Terrell County,
Georgia

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Abstract

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By Mary Claire Kelly

By 1958, the Civil Rights Movement was heating up. The Civil Rights Act of 1957 had passed the year before, schools were forcibly desegregating and sit-ins and other forms of nonviolence protest were popping up across the South. That year, a black man named James Brazier was brutally beaten to death by white policemen in Dawson, Terrell County, Georgia. His death, among other incidents, propelled the sparsely populated rural county of Terrell, Georgia into the national spotlight for its excesses of police brutality and the suppression of the black vote. The federal government stepped into the community, ultimately unable to force lasting change. As the Albany Movement attracted media attention to nearby Dougherty County, Terrell County ignited in racial tensions brought on by the arrival of workers from the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Community. While local blacks decided whether to join or avoid the struggle for equal rights, James Brazier’s widow would embark on her own civil rights mission. Under a southern legal system in which white-on-black crime rarely secured a conviction, Hattie Brazier would team up with prominent civil rights leaders to pursue justice for her husband’s death against the protectors of local white supremacy. She would sue Dawson and Terrell County law enforcement officials for depriving her husband of the most basic civil right: the right to life.

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Introduction: Threats

Terrell County, Georgia honored its centennial in 1956 with a special weeklong celebration in April. The festivities included the “Miss Centennial” and “Miss Terrell County” pageants, daily activities dedicated to agriculture and the military, and nightly Centennial Pageant performances and “Colossal Fireworks Displays.”

The city of Dawson, the county seat, released a 76-page “panorama” to commemorate the event, which was “dedicated to the men and women whose far-seeing judgment and Christian beliefs have made Terrell County one of the growing, progressive Counties of Southwest Georgia, where families take root and grow, nurtured by working Churches, good schools and expressed neighborliness.”¹

Somber portraits of deceased members of the important founding families peer out from the booklet’s pages, with their genealogies meticulously detailed underneath. Photographs of old railroads and men on horseback show the county’s transition from nineteenth century wilderness to an agricultural community. “Some Interesting Facts” on the last page include a list of Terrell County’s P.T.A. organizations, the total amount of paving in the county, the date of the first train to come to the county and a history of the Spanish peanut.

Despite the fact that two-thirds of the county’s population at the time was African-American, the only black people in the booklet appear in photographs as laborers or are mentioned, nameless, as slaves.

Terrell County’s Centennial Panorama presents one narrative of the region’s history: a rural locality established, sustained and led by white men. The absence of the county’s African-American community in this narrative was historically accurate in that blacks had not had equal

¹ *Terrell County’s Centennial Panorama* (1956)

political, social or economic representation in Terrell County for the county's entire one hundred year existence. Like other Southwest Georgia counties, Terrell was built by slave labor and later sustained by racial oppression.

Terrell County was a part of Georgia's "Black Belt" in both an agricultural and population sense. Its rich, dark soil yielded peanuts, cotton, fertilizer and corn. Its majority black population worked that soil and labored in the railroad, mills, logging camps or white peoples' homes.

Dawson was the seat of Terrell County government and held most of its industry and inhabitants. The settlements of Bronwood, Parrot and Sasser contained much of the rest of the population. Albany, in neighboring Dougherty County, was the closest major urban area—about a half hour's drive away.

By 1960, 12,743 people called Terrell County home. The overall population had declined 11 percent in the previous decade, a period when Georgia's statewide population had grown nearly 15 percent.²

Urbanization had left Terrell County in the dust, as it did much of the South's rural countryside. Throughout the twentieth century, people flocked from rural areas to the cities in search of better wages and a better life.

Blacks in particular fled rural regions of the former Confederacy in huge numbers. Between 1940 and 1960, the "Great Migration" of blacks from the rural South to the urban North dropped the number of blacks living in the rural parts of the Confederate States from 51 percent

² "Georgia Statistics System: Time Series Analysis," <http://georgiastats.uga.edu/timeseries1.html>, a time series data analysis consolidated from the Regional Economic Information System from the U.S. Dept. of Commerce and the Georgia County Guide.

to 23 percent.³ Blacks who migrated during this period arrived in cities hoping for a life where their dignity could be respected in a way impossible to find in the American South.

Jim Crow, the “interwoven legal and economic system, political regimen, and variegated social and cultural world”⁴ that enforced racial inequality and discrimination in the twentieth century South, enshrouded Terrell County as much as the rest of the region. Despite the Emancipation Proclamation, and the Fourteenth and Fifteenth Amendments of over 80 years before—and perhaps also in strong reaction to those federal actions—southern whites and their “southern way of life” in the mid-1950s continued to brutally and blatantly oppress the rights of black Americans.

By 1956, the white-dominated narrative of the American South was being threatened by changing national sentiment and successful federal legislation against segregation. The Supreme Court had ruled in the 1954 decision *Brown v Board of Education* that segregation in public schools was unconstitutional—opening the door for legislation to desegregate a wide range of whites-only facilities, jobs and political enclaves as well as a nationwide campaign for equal rights.

A little more than a year after *Brown*—and the year before Terrell County’s Centennial—the lynching death of 14-year-old Chicago native Emmett Till in Money, Mississippi, kick-started the national civil rights movement. Two white men had kidnapped, tortured and shot the boy for ostensibly whistling at a white woman.

Till’s death would have been simply another statistic of Southern extralegal violence if his mother, Mamie Till Bradley, had not chosen to give her son an open casket funeral. The lynching, the pictures of the gruesome corpse, the grieving mother, and the subsequent acquittal

3 Craig Heinicke, “African American History and Urban Labor Skills: 1950-1960,” *Agricultural History* 68 (1994): 185.

4 Jane Dailey, *The Age of Jim Crow* (New York: W.W. Norton & Co., 2009) xii.

of the men responsible captivated the nation and brought race-related violence to the forefront of the national conscience.

Later that same year, in 1955, Rosa Parks' act of defiance in refusing to give up her seat in the white section of a bus sparked the Montgomery bus boycotts, a 381-day campaign that would lead to the establishment of a national civil rights movement with Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. as its figurehead.

Miles of dusty roads, a declining agricultural economy and a culture of traditional conservatism muffled the significance of these events in Southwest Georgia in 1956. But by the next year, the national conversation over civil rights was growing louder and harder to ignore. In 1957, for the first time since the Reconstruction period that ended in 1877, Congress passed civil rights legislation to ensure that all Americans, regardless of race, would be able to exercise their right to vote.

The Civil Rights Act of 1957 established the Civil Rights Division of the U.S. Justice Department and the U.S. Civil Rights Commission. Both would find their way to Terrell County within the next few years because of the intensity of racial oppression in the isolated rural community.

In this small society where whites controlled employment, limited political representation and meted out justice, actions that defied the status quo could result in unemployment, imprisonment, violence and even death for blacks. One hundred years after the establishment of the county they called home, Terrell County's African-Americans were mired in a cycle of poverty constantly reinforced by social norms and threats of violence. The consequences of breaking out of this cycle could be even more daunting than the reality of living within it.

James Brazier, a black 30-year-old black World War II veteran and father of four, had a reputation in the city of Dawson for a higher standard of living than most Terrell County blacks and some whites. He and his wife, Hattie Brazier, owned their home. They worked four jobs between them, sometimes picking cotton for extra income.

While the median annual income for nonwhite families in late 1950s Terrell County was \$1,300, James Brazier earned around \$3,600 a year—not even including his wife’s income.⁵ Only 12 percent of the nonwhite families in Terrell County made over \$3,000 a year. The median white income for the county was \$4,300.⁶

In comparison, the overall median salary for the entire country at the time was \$5,600.⁷

James Brazier worked as a serviceman at Stevens Chevrolet in Dawson by day. In 1956, he bought himself and his family a brand new Chevrolet automobile.

In November 1957, a white Dawson city police officer arrested James Brazier for speeding. That officer, Weyman Burchle Cherry, took him to the Terrell County jail, slapped him on the head—hard enough to knock him to the ground—and said, “You smart son-of-a-bitch, I been wanting to get my hands on you for a long time.”

When James Brazier asked why, Cherry answered, “You is a nigger who is buying new cars and we can’t hardly live. I’ll get you yet.”⁸

Southern white policemen were typically low-paid, lower class men with very little education or formal training.⁹ Cherry had not had any training to be a police officer beyond his

5 *Brazier v. Cherry*, Civil Action No. 475 in the U.S. District Court for the Middle District of Georgia, accessed through the National Archives in Morrow, Georgia, Testimony from Hattie Brazier, 463.

6 SNCC microfilm, “Statistical Profile of Counties,” Subgroup A Series IV Reel 9, accessed through Emory University Woodruff Library, 341.

7 Stephen G.N. Tuck, *Beyond Atlanta: The Struggle for Racial Equality in Georgia, 1940-1980* (Athens: UGA Press, 2001) 168-169.

8 U.S. Commission on Civil Rights, *Justice: a US Commission on Civil Rights Report*, (1961) from affidavit from Hattie Bell Brazier and *Report on Field Investigations in Terrell County*, 9.

World War II service. Even when Cherry was later promoted to assistant chief of police, he earned about \$2,400—still only two-thirds of Brazier’s annual income.¹⁰

James Brazier received medical treatment for his injuries from that arrest. By spring 1958, the Braziers had bought another new car: a 1958 Chevrolet Impala. This automobile would have had a starting price of \$2,586—almost \$200 more than Cherry’s annual salary.¹¹

That spring, a different white Dawson police officer, Randolph McDonald, asked the Braziers how they bought their second new car.

“I works for what I gets,” James Brazier replied.

McDonald, in a response that would come to have more meaning later, told James Brazier, “You’ll never remember paying for it.”¹²

Within the city of Dawson, the Braziers held the reputation of being “uppity Negroes.”¹³ They did not shy away from economic success out of fear of white jealousy. James Brazier kept his brand new Chevrolet—light blue with a white top—clean and shining, and drove it proudly around the small town.

Those encounters between James Brazier and the police would escalate and by late April 1958, Brazier would die after the officers arrested him and twice beat him, once after taking him from a Terrell County jail cell in the middle of the night. The U.S. Department of Justice would conclude that his assailants were the same police officers who had tormented him because of his

9 Gunnar Myrdal, *An American Dilemma* (New York: McGraw-Hill, 1964) 537.

10 *Brazier v. Cherry*, Testimony from Weyman B. Cherry, 183-186.

11 Author’s personal interview with Verda Brazier Bush, Sara Brazier and Hattie Brazier Polite in August 2013 (Brett Gadsden and Hank Klibanoff also interviewers); “The Complete History of the Chevrolet Impala,” <http://www.complex.com/rides/2012/05/the-complete-history-of-the-chevrolet-impala/1958>

12 U.S. Commission on Civil Rights, *Justice*, from affidavit from Hattie Bell Brazier and *Report on Field Investigation in Terrell County*, 173 (footnote).

13 U.S. Commission on Civil Rights, *Justice*, 10.

visible display of financial comfort. His fate would represent to local African-Americans the ramifications of reaching for success in a society that demanded their subservience.

James Brazier's death was a key event in rousing local blacks into action. A small group would open their community to nationwide media attention to expose the level of fear and intimidation under which they lived. Only two years after the local centennial, the white-only narrative of life in Terrell County unraveled under national scrutiny to reveal what a visiting reporter from *The Washington Post* would deem "an atmosphere of terror."

The national press spotlight would open up the isolated county to intervention from the federal government, forcing those who protected white supremacy to defend themselves in court. The newly formed Civil Rights Division would pursue criminal indictments against the officers responsible for violence against James Brazier and others. Although this action would be unsuccessful, the Justice Department would file the first voting rights suit under the Civil Rights Act of 1957 against the Terrell County Board of Registrars and legally succeed.

After the initial media attention, Terrell County was no longer buffered from the national civil rights debate; it was thrust into the middle of it. When the high-profile Albany Movement began in adjacent Dougherty County in 1961, attracting civil rights leaders such as Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. as well as the national media, it would bleed into Terrell County. Civil rights advocates from the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee (SNCC) would form the Southwest Georgia Voter Registration Project, which would go into Terrell and other rural counties to try and build a black voting bloc in the majority black region.

SNCC workers would attract violence and resistance from the white community. Their mission was to build the representation of blacks within their own community by encouraging

political representation. This goal challenged the social order that kept whites in power and local whites would prove they would resort to terrorizing tactics to preserve their way of life.

While race relations heated up in Terrell, James Brazier's widow would embark on her own civil rights mission. Under a southern legal system in which white-on-black crime rarely secured a conviction, Hattie Brazier would team up with prominent civil rights leaders to pursue justice for her husband's death against the protectors of local white supremacy. She would sue Dawson and Terrell County law enforcement officials for depriving her husband of the most basic civil right: the right to life.

The legally sanctioned violence in James Brazier's tragic story became part of Terrell County's reputation in the wider civil rights movement as "Terrible" Terrell. Hattie Brazier's pursuit of justice would become a symbol of the struggle for equal rights in the county. The young widow's suit would stand for the battle between black activism and white resistance in Terrell County during the dying days of Jim Crow.

Death and Violence

With a name charged in Confederate memory, Robert E. Lee Baker was the main reporter for *The Washington Post* covering the American South in 1958. Baker, who would later adapt the less-provocative byline “Robert E. Baker,”¹⁴ had toured the South a few years previously and provided the newspaper’s few stories about the region that were not from a wire service. In June of that year, Baker’s managing editor, Al Friendly, sent the budding civil rights reporter to Southwest Georgia at the urging of the Terrell County chapter of the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP).¹⁵

The African-Americans who had drawn *The Washington Post* to Terrell County had horrifying stories to tell. They would not allow Baker to print their names. They would not even talk to him within county borders. When they did convene with Baker, he found, they “talked softly, earnestly behind tightly drawn shades.”

Baker discovered what he would later describe as an “atmosphere of fear,” an “atmosphere of intimidation,” and an “atmosphere of despair” cloaking Dawson, the Terrell County seat.

Baker’s accounts of the political oppression and police brutality in Terrell County were so shockingly vivid that the *Post* headline writer had no choice but to be direct about the story splashed across the June 8 front page: “Death and Violence Terrorize Negroes of Georgia Town.”¹⁶

14 Robert G. Kaiser, “An overlooked dream, now remembered,” *The Washington Post*, August 23, 2013, accessed March 14, 2014, http://www.washingtonpost.com/opinions/an-overlooked-dream-now-remembered/2013/08/23/2a4a57ea-0b4f-11e3-9941-6711ed662e71_story.html.

15 NAACP papers on microfilm, Amos Holmes Field Secretary File Part 24 D, “Confidential Report Re: Investigation of Terrell County, GA, “ dated June 9, 1958.

16 Robert E. Lee Baker, “Death and Violence Terrorize Negroes of Georgia Town,” *The Washington Post and Times Herald*, June 8, 1958.

Baker's story would open a window on rampant racial violence and oppression in the small rural town, bringing Dawson's hidden brutality from the far reaches of obscurity to national attention. Once the spotlight was on Dawson and Terrell County, FBI agents would be compelled to expand a criminal investigation they were about to close and Justice Department lawyers would bring a civil lawsuit accusing the county of racial discrimination in voting.

In his article, Baker introduced readers to James Brazier.

On the afternoon of April 20, James Brazier was driving home from church in Dawson when he saw a policeman, Randolph McDonald, arresting his father, Odell Brazier, on the side of the road. As James Brazier pulled over, he saw McDonald hitting the elder Brazier on the head with a police blackjack.¹⁷

James Brazier got out of his car—the 1958 Chevrolet Impala—and implored McDonald to stop hitting his father. McDonald pushed Odell Brazier into the police cruiser and drove off toward the county jail.

Worried about his father, James Brazier then drove home and told his wife, Hattie Brazier, what had happened. They were still talking in the family's back yard when McDonald and another Dawson police officer, Weyman B. Cherry drove up to the house in a police vehicle. The officers walked onto the Brazier property and dragged James Brazier to the front lawn.

McDonald charged that Brazier had threatened him and interfered with Odell Brazier's arrest. In front of the young Brazier children and an audience of neighbors, Cherry kicked James Brazier in the groin and beat him on the head with a blackjack. Some neighbors claimed Cherry pulled a gun on him.

¹⁷ This account comes from later investigations by the FBI, the NAACP and the U.S. Civil Rights Commission and attorney Donald Hollowell, who would later represent Hattie Brazier in a civil suit.

James Brazier's 10-year-old son got between his father and Cherry in an attempt to stop the violence, but the policeman pushed the boy to the ground. The police officers charged James Brazier with resisting arrest and took him to the Terrell County Jail, which shared facilities with the city of Dawson Police Department.

After Cherry and McDonald hauled James Brazier away from his home in the police cruiser, Hattie Brazier immediately tracked down her husband's employer, Ragan Arnold. She hoped that he, as a white man, could reason with the officers. After Arnold did not convince the officers to let her husband out of the Terrell County Jail, Hattie Brazier worried alone in bed until two in the morning.¹⁸

When he was brought into the prison, James Brazier was wearing his Sunday suit, a white shirt and dress shoes. He had head wounds, slurred speech and blood in his ear, a local doctor who saw him observed.¹⁹ The doctor, who was also the County Medical Examiner, interpreted the slurred speech as intoxication and failed to see that the multiple symptoms suggested a serious skull fracture.

Officers transferred James Brazier from the male side of the prison to the female side in compliance with the doctor's recommendation to put the injured man somewhere quiet. According to other black inmates from inside the jail, Cherry, McDonald and other officers led James Brazier out of his cell later that night. When they returned him hours later, he was incoherent, bloody and naked, wrapped in an army blanket.²⁰ The next morning, expected to make an appearance at Mayor's Court and enter a plea for resisting arrest, a nearly comatose James Brazier had to be carried out of his cell in order to attend court.

¹⁸ *Brazier v Cherry*, Testimony from Hattie Brazier, 445-446.

¹⁹ *Brazier v Cherry*, Testimony from Dr. Charles Ward, 908-910

²⁰ FBI Files on James Brazier, interview with Mary Carolyn Clyde

The brutality James Brazier experienced while in police custody would later become the subject of investigations by the FBI, the NAACP, and the U.S. Civil Rights Commission—seemingly everyone but the local authorities, who themselves were the prime suspects in his injuries.

V.L. Singletary, Dawson’s mayor and the court judge, fined Odell Brazier but postponed James Brazier’s hearing because “he appeared to be intoxicated.”²¹ Hattie Brazier arrived at the courthouse just in time to see the end of her husband’s appearance in mayor’s court. When she saw him, she screamed.

She later described the scene: “He was sitting in a chair, slung over...and his tongue was hanging kind-of half-way out and a long sleet of white slobber was hanging out his mouth.”²²

The mayor threw her out of court for causing a disturbance. After the trial, she drove her husband to the Terrell County Hospital, where they saw the same doctor who had treated James Brazier’s head injuries the night before with nothing but a bandage. Upon this examination, the doctor told Hattie Brazier to rush the now unconscious man to a specialist an hour away. With her family in tow, Hattie Brazier rocketed off to Columbus.

Sara Brazier, James Brazier’s sister, was pregnant at the time. She cradled her brother’s battered head in the backseat of their car as the family sped towards the hospital in Columbus. Her son was later born with a bump on his head—a birth abnormality she blamed on her close contact with Brazier’s misshapen skull.²³

21 *Brazier v. Cherry*, Testimony from V.L. Singletary, 421.

22 *Brazier v. Cherry*, Testimony from Hattie Brazier, 451-454.

23 Author’s personal interview with Verda Brazier Bush, Sara Brazier and Hattie Brazier Polite in August 2013 (Brett Gadsden and Hank Klibanoff also interviewers).

During the four days James Brazier lay in the Columbus Medical Center, Hattie Brazier and her children stayed in the Columbus area. A nurse at the Columbus Medical Center let Hattie Brazier stay at her home nearby so that she could stay close to her husband as he died.

All of James Brazier's children gathered to say goodbye to their father. Verda Brazier remembered the scene:

“When we saw him that Friday his head was soft as cotton, like a newborn baby... They said he didn't gain conscious but he did for a moment, because they called all the children in to say, you know, goodbye. And he opened his eyes and said ‘Where gurl?’ He called my mama ‘gurl.’”²⁴

James Brazier stayed at the Medical Center in Columbus until his death on April 25, 1958 of cerebral necrosis and hemorrhage related to head trauma.²⁵ His family held a military funeral for him at I Hope Baptist Church the next week. The Dawson Police force did not ease up on the Brazier family even when common decency called for it; police officers arrested Odell Brazier again, for running a stop sign, on the day of his son's funeral.

While in Dawson reporting, Baker heard and told *Washington Post* readers another story of murder: the death of Willie Countryman, a 32-year-old black laborer. A month after Brazier died, police officer Cherry shot Countryman in the middle of the night in the victim's own backyard. Cherry and Dawson officer Robert Hancock said they had been investigating a loud noise when Countryman appeared, from behind a tree, brandishing a knife.

24 Author's personal interview with Verda Brazier Bush, Sara Brazier and Hattie Brazier Polite in August 2013 (Brett Gadsden and Hank Klibanoff also interviewers).

25 FBI Files on James Brazier, Coroner's report.

Black witnesses said there had been no noise outside that night, besides the ring of the lone bullet bursting from Cherry's pistol, and that Countryman's backyard had no tree thick enough to hide him.²⁶

Dawson's black community also told Baker three blacks were beaten for swearing in front of a white woman. They told him of Tobe Latimer, whom Cherry shot in the buttocks.

Baker also learned how officers locked 21-year-old Billy Flagg in the county jail for making a pistol-shaped motion with his hand at a police cruiser. When Flagg's mother, Annie Flagg, came to the jail to see her son, the officers locked her behind bars as well.

Law enforcement officials could persecute the county's black community in part because blacks had practically no say in Terrell County. In a county of about 12,500 people, more than 7,500 of whom were black, only 48 black people²⁷ were registered to vote. There were 3,486 white registered voters.

The animosity police officers directed towards James Brazier reflected a growing tension whites were feeling as they saw threats to their economic and political supremacy growing stronger. Federal legislation in the form of the Civil Rights Act of 1957, which aimed to give all citizens access to the vote regardless of skin color, and the burgeoning national movement for racial equality had given Terrell County blacks the encouragement they needed to challenge their inferior status in the community.

Almost three weeks before James Brazier's death in April 1958, a group of Terrell County blacks had visited the county courthouse in an attempt to register to vote. Most of them were teachers in the black schools and many were college graduates.

26 NAACP papers on microfilm, Amos Holmes Field Secretary File Part 24 D, "Confidential Report Re: Investigation of Terrell County, GA," dated June 9, 1958.

27 Donald L. Grant, *The Way It Was in the South: The Black Experience in Georgia* (Toronto: Carol Publishing Group, 1993) 371.

This group of educated black men and women could not pass the registrar's literacy test, which required registrants to "read, interpret and write any paragraph of the Federal or State Constitution."

If the registrant could not perform that task, he or she could try to answer 20-30 oral questions. The registrant's answers to these questions were completely open to the interpretation of the registrar, a white Terrell County official.

Questions included: "What does the Constitution of Georgia provide regarding the suspension of the writ of habeus corpus?" "What are the names of the Federal District judges in Georgia?" and "Who are the citizens of Georgia?"

One of the black registrants, a teacher with a Bachelor of Science degree, had been trying to register for two years. He was rejected for ostensibly slurring the word "original." According to reports, that teacher was later fired for "getting too big."²⁸

"There is an old joke about the Negro who was asked by the Georgia registrar what such-and-such section of the Constitution meant," a black Terrell County resident told Baker.

"It means ah ain't goin' to git to vote'... I used to laugh at that joke. I don't think it's funny anymore."

This group of registrants planned to push back against this blatant violation of the infant Civil Rights Act of 1957. Baker's article would give them the publicity they needed to propel their case forward.

While Dawson's blacks met Baker in secret and only dared whisper their stories of violence and oppression, Dawson's white law enforcement officials brazenly gave Baker quotations verifying their tyrannical reputations.

28 Robert E. Lee Baker, "Death and Violence Terrorize Negroes of Georgia Town," *The Washington Post and Times Herald*, June 8, 1958.

“You know, Cap’, there ain’t nothing like fear to keep niggers in line,” Terrell County Sheriff Zachary “Z.T.” Taylor Mathews told Baker. “I’m talking about ‘outlaw’ niggers. And we always tell them there are four roads leading out of Dawson in all directions and they are free to go anytime they don’t like it here.”

Mathews, who ran the Terrell County jail, did not deny that blacks were excluded from the local political process.

“Well, Cap’, I believe we ought to be strict about who votes,” the sheriff said. “There isn’t a nigger in Georgia who wouldn’t take over if he could. They want all the power.”

The law enforcement officials blamed the recent unrest on news from the northern press spreading ideas about civil rights and “Communists.” They blamed the violent incidents on alcohol.

Dawson Police Chief Howard Lee told Baker he was annoyed when white citizens bothered him about James Brazier’s death. He showed Baker the man’s record of seven arrests as an explanation for the deceased man’s character, but noted that he had been surprised by Countryman’s apparent attack on his officers. He said Countryman had been “a good nigger.”

Lee said he didn’t like the FBI coming around asking questions about the Brazier and Countryman deaths.

“It aggravates me,” Lee told Baker, “because the FBI starts talking to niggers and then the niggers get the thinking they’re important and it stirs them up.”

The police chief specifically requested that Baker write down several of his memorable quotations, including: “We’re just as good to niggers as they’ll let us be.”

Lee continued: “The nigger resents everything the white man has, all you’ve got, all I’ve got.”

Baker described Dawson's leading official, Mayor Singletary, as "a quiet, pleasant man" who "seemed weary" when talking about race. Singletary was the judge who had ignored James Brazier's visibly severe medical state in court the morning of April 21. Singletary told Baker that race relations in Dawson were "generally good" and that the city had "lots of good niggers."

The city's police chief painted a prophetically different picture.

"We've had a lot of trouble," Lee told Baker. "We're going to have more of it."

Baker's front-page article evoked sharp reactions across the state and the nation.

An editorial in *The Washington Post* published the day after the original article eloquently summarized Northern sentiment. The editorial writer called for federal action from the Department of Justice and the U.S. Commission on Civil Rights.

"For the sake of America's good name in the contemporary world," the author implored, "for the sake of simple human decency, let them go in there and root out this evil."

The editorial continued, "What has happened in Terrell County concerns the conscience of humanity."²⁹

Baker's national article put Dawson's main news source on the defense. "At the moment without a 'Little Rock,' The Washington Post and Times-Herald must have a whipping boy," *Dawson News* editor-in-chief Carl Rountree protested in a June 12 editorial. "And so they have chosen Dawson, on the basis of rumor, as its new target."

"The negroes of Dawson have nothing to fear," Rountree asserted.³⁰

29 James H. Gray, "Terror in Georgia," *The Washington Post and Times Herald*, June 9, 1958, accessed through Willie Countryman FBI Files.

30 Carl Rountree, "Dawson Negroes Have Nothing to Fear Except 'Fear Itself,'" *The Dawson News*, June 12, 1958.

Other southern newspapers defended Dawson, which had become an example of southern racial oppression and a possible excuse for the federal government to intervene in civil rights issues in Georgia. Jack Nelson, a reporter for *The Atlanta Constitution*, went into Dawson and wrote, “There is no ‘atmosphere of fear’ among the general Negro population of Dawson.” As evidence, Nelson pointed to two prominent Terrell County African-American leaders who denied any reason for blacks to be afraid in Dawson.³¹

Nelson’s colleagues would later say that the reporter, who went on to cover civil rights aggressively for *The Los Angeles Times*, had been told by his assigning editor to find ways to discredit Baker’s account—and that he regretted that story for the rest of his career.³²

Terrell County’s officials justified their actions. “Anything I did I would do again if the circumstances were the same,” Cherry told *The Atlanta Constitution*. He maintained that Baker never asked him about Brazier’s death or any other violent incidents for his article. In the same article, Chief Lee defends Cherry as “one of the most level-headed officers I have worked with.”³³

As Baker’s article rippled across the country, pressure mounted on the federal government to act. African American Congressman Charles C. Diggs Jr. (D- Mich.) deemed the “obvious voter intimidations and ‘under-color-of-law’ savage brutality” in Dawson “the counterpart of the worst Nazi abomination.”³⁴

31 Jack Nelson, “Dawson Officials Deny Capital Paper ‘Fear’ Story,” *The Atlanta Constitution*, June 9, 1958.

32 Gene Roberts and Hank Klibanoff, *The Race Beat: The Press, the Civil Rights Struggle, and the Awakening of a Nation* (New York: Vintage Books, 2006), 437-438.

33 Nelson, “Dawson Officials Deny Capital Paper ‘Fear’ Story,” *The Atlanta Constitution*, June 9, 1958.

34 “Halt to Georgia Brutality Against Negroes Asked,” *Associated Press*, June 12, 1958.

Diggs and the NAACP urged an investigation from the Civil Rights Commission, an advisory body to the president that had been created by the Civil Rights Act of 1957. The Commission would not investigate Terrell County for another two years,

The FBI had conducted preliminary investigations into the deaths of James Brazier and Willie Countryman, but the information broadcast by the *Post* story motivated the Justice Department to reopen the cases and request a full investigation into all of the article's allegations.³⁵ Working with the NAACP, which was conducting its own investigation, federal agents gathered information for legal prosecution.

During the first week of August, U.S. Attorney Frank Evans went before a federal grand jury sitting in Macon and pursued indictments against Terrell County law enforcement officials based on two century-old criminal statutes: a law forbidding officers from imposing different punishments for different citizens and a law forbidding officials from depriving any citizens of their rights.³⁶

Officially sanctioned racial violence had a precedent in rural Georgia, set in nearby Baker County in 1945. That year, Sheriff Claude Screws arrested and violently beat Robert Hall, a black man, before throwing him in jail to die of his injuries.

A federal court found Screws guilty of depriving Hall of his Fourteenth Amendment civil rights—specifically, his right to life. However, the U.S. Supreme Court had reversed the decision on the basis that the prosecution had to definitively prove that Screws beat Hall to death while specifically thinking about the black man's constitutional rights.³⁷

³⁵ The FBI began a preliminary investigation into James Brazier's death after Odell Brazier went to the agency's Atlanta office, while Brazier still lay comatose in the hospital.

John Wesley Dobbs, prominent African-American leader and grand master of all "Negro Masonic Lodges" in Georgia, was "instrumental" in convincing the FBI to conduct a preliminary investigation into Countryman's death.³⁵ He furnished evidence for the case, including a letter written to him by a group of Terrell County's leading black citizens. They write:

It has been said that he Mr Cheery [sic] say he is going to get four more. The colored people is worried and afred, but if something dont be done some are planning on getting there guns and trying to stop it that way seam like no one else cares if they kill all of us. They don't belive no one care for them we are praying that something be done in a hurry!! In a Hurry! In a Hurry!³⁵

³⁶ "Jury Bars Action in Negro Deaths," *The New York Times*, August 9, 1958.

³⁷ Another impediment to the Justice Department's influence was the question of whether prosecution would even be helpful. Justice Department officials had a number of trepidations about the very real possibility of failing to indict in a civil rights criminal case: that

Over the course of three days, U.S. Attorney Evans presented to the grand jury testimony from over twenty witnesses in the deaths of James Brazier and Willie Countryman, and the injuries to Willie B. Latimer, Billy Flagg, and another black man named Eugene Renfroe.

One key black witness was missing: Marvin Goshea, who had been in jail with James Brazier the April night he was removed and beaten, and who had been prepared to provide incriminating testimony.

Goshea had seen James Brazier walk into his jail cell wearing his Sunday suit and tie. Goshea had held a coherent conversation with the man before Officers Cherry and McDonald ordered James Brazier to follow them out of the cell later that night. Goshea heard James Brazier ask them to wait so he could put on his shoes.

Cherry replied, “You won’t need no shoes.”³⁸

The next morning, Goshea helped carry a bloody and incoherent James Brazier to Mayor’s Court. The injured man no longer wore his blue suit coat; he wore only a ripped undershirt, dirty trousers and four bruised and red foot-long marks on his back. His head was bleeding worse than when he had entered the jail.

Shortly after receiving a subpoena to appear before the federal grand jury, the 23-year-old Goshea was walking on a Dawson street when Officer Cherry stopped him and told him to go to jail.

When Goshea asked why, Officer Cherry replied, “You just need to be in jail.”

Goshea was kept in jail for one week, including the entire length of the federal grand jury hearing. Goshea never testified. At the end of the week, Cherry told him he could go home.

such a failure would, as Anthony Lewis of the New York Times wrote, “increase resentment of Federal interference, discourage Negroes in asserting their rights and encourage white persons to think they need not fear Federal punishment.”

38 Civil Rights Commission, *Justice*, from *Field Report on Investigation in Terrell County*, 11.

“I can only guess,” Goshea later said, “although no one ever told me, that the only reason I was locked up was because they didn’t want me to go to Macon.”³⁹

After three days of testimony, the 23-member grand jury refused on August 8 to indict Cherry, McDonald and the other law enforcement officials.

The New York Times called the decision “a graphic example of the difficulties in the way of Federal prosecutions for civil rights violations in the South.”⁴⁰ However, one anonymous Justice Department official quoted by the paper said that the federal intervention in Dawson was not in vain.

“...The police in Dawson know that they will have to answer the questions of Federal investigators when this kind of thing happens,” the official said. “Even if they may feel safe from legal punishment, it takes something out of a man to answer those questions.”⁴¹

Times reporter Anthony Lewis reported that the verdict was an example of the difficulties of prosecuting civil rights violations under federal law—mostly significantly, the impossibility of getting a typically all-white Southern jury to bring any indictments for white-on-black crimes under those laws. Lewis pointed out that the divide between state and federal authority was one impediment to the strength of the recent Civil Rights Act of 1957. In an August 16 article, Lewis wrote that the federal government was under criticism from black leaders for not having invoked the act in a single voting rights case.

“They say they want a strong, clear first case to test the law,” Lewis said.⁴²

39 U.S. Commission on Civil Rights, *Justice: a US Commission on Civil Rights Report*, (1961), *Report on Field Investigations in Terrell County*, p 174 (footnotes).

40 “Jury Bars Action in Negro Deaths,” *The New York Times*, August 9, 1958.

41 “Jury Bars Action in Negro Deaths,” *The New York Times*, August 9, 1958.

42 Anthony Lewis, “Civil Rights Issue Test Federal Powers,” *The New York Times*, August 16, 1958, accessed March 31, 1958, <http://query.nytimes.com/mem/archive/pdf?res=F60911FD3D59127A93C5A81783D85F4C8585F9>.

The Justice Department decided it had that first case in Terrell County. The department returned to the county one month later to file the first-ever court action under the Civil Rights Act of 1957 in the District Court for the Middle District of Georgia. *U.S. v Raines* named the Terrell County Board of Registrars as defendants and charged the board with “arbitrary refusal to register Negroes who demonstrate themselves to be fully qualified.”⁴³

“This was an effort to give the Government civil rights powers that did not depend on juries,” Lewis wrote of the department’s decision.

Judge William Bootle of the U.S. District Court in Macon found in September 1960 that 30 Terrell County blacks had been denied the right to vote based on race. The court ordered the board of registrars to put four African-Americans on the voter registration rolls and placed an injunction against any further acts of discrimination.

However, Bootle denied the Justice Department’s request to appoint a “voter referee” to supervise voter registration. So while there was a formal federal injunction against the Dawson registrars’ actions, there was no system in place to make sure that the injunction was followed.

The federal government’s intrusion beginning in 1958 had not created lasting change in Terrell County. The 1960 federal injunction went unenforced, and the Macon federal grand jury’s decision in 1958 not to indict the Dawson law enforcement officials allowed their violent tyranny over the black community to continue. That message of impunity for white supremacists was underscored when Cherry, the officer who had killed two black men and wounded at least one more, was promoted to police chief in 1959.

The Justice Department would take no further action against the officials in court. It would be left to Hattie Brazier, James Brazier’s widow, to decide whether or not to pursue

43 Anthony Lewis, “Rights Act of ‘57 Cited in U.S. Suit on Georgia Vote,” *The New York Times*, September 5, 1958, accessed March 31, 2014, <http://query.nytimes.com/mem/archive/pdf?res=F60A13FA3F54127B93C7A91782D85F4C8585F9>.

justice against her husband's killers through a different route: civil action. Much like Mamie Till Bradley, the mother of Emmett Till who had uncovered her son's corpse for the nation, Hattie Brazier had to make a choice about the unjust death of her loved one. She could quietly accept her husband's death as an example of insurmountable Southern injustice or she could pursue her day in court.

Pursuit of Justice

After Robert E. Baker's article was published in *The Washington Post*, the Brazier family found itself under intense pressure in Dawson.

Verda Brazier, who at 13 was the oldest child of Hattie and James Brazier, walked through a barrage of taunts and rocks to get to school.

"Nah nah nah nah nah, your daddy got killed, nah nah nah nah nah," she would recall over fifty years later.⁴⁴

Hattie Brazier sent Verda and her brother, James Brazier Jr., to live with relatives in New Jersey. James Brazier Jr. was the 10-year-old who had thrown himself in between his father and Cherry that fateful spring evening. His siblings believed that the death of their father, his namesake, gave him lifelong anger problems: so distraught was James Brazier Jr. by the death of his father that for years afterward, his siblings could not mention their father's name in his presence.⁴⁵

James Brazier's sisters stayed in Dawson. One of them, Sara, continued to work at a restaurant where Cherry, Mathews and other law enforcement officers frequently ate lunch. The sight of them at the lunch counter crashed a new wave of anger over the young woman every day.⁴⁶

44 Author's personal interview with Verda Brazier Bush, Sara Brazier and Hattie Brazier Polite in August 2013 (Brett Gadsden and Hank Klibanoff also interviewers).

45 Author's personal interview with Verda Brazier Bush, Sara Brazier and Hattie Brazier Polite in August 2013 (Brett Gadsden and Hank Klibanoff also interviewers).

46 Author's personal interview with Verda Brazier Bush, Sara Brazier and Hattie Brazier Polite in August 2013 (Brett Gadsden and Hank Klibanoff also interviewers).

Hattie Brazier and her two younger children, Hattie Jr. and Willie, moved a half hour's drive away from Dawson to Albany to live with her mother Hattie Bell Williams, who had thought of the elder James Brazier as her own son.⁴⁷

Hattie Brazier could not avoid harassment by the Dawson police even by fleeing to neighboring Dougherty County. In 1959, Dawson policemen arrested her in Albany on a charge of stealing her own "power mow" from her father-in-law (Odell Brazier), who had borrowed it.

48

Sheriff Mathews showed no sympathy to Hattie Brazier for her husband's death. "A nigger like you I feel like slapping them out," he told the widow when he encountered her that year. "You niggers set around here and look at television and go up North and come back and do to white folks here like the niggers up North do, but you ain't gonna do it.

"I'm gonna carry the South's orders out like they oughta be done," the sheriff continued.⁴⁹

By 1959 Hattie Brazier had already taken steps to keep legal action alive against the sheriff and the Dawson police officers whom she, the Justice Department and the U.S. Civil Rights Commission believed had killed her husband. The federal grand jury had decided not to bring criminal charges against them, but Hattie Brazier still could push forward to civil court.

In April 1960, almost exactly two years after Cherry and McDonald grabbed James Brazier from his home, Hattie Brazier's lawyers filed a civil suit in the U.S. District Court for the Middle District of Georgia in Americus against Cherry, McDonald, Mathews, and Howard Lee.⁵⁰

47 *Brazier v. Cherry*, Testimony from Hattie Bell Williams, 645.

48 NAACP papers, Amos Holmes field secretary files, Part 26 D 1959 annual report.

49 U.S. Commission on Civil Rights, *Justice*, Affidavit from Hattie Brazier and *Report on Field Investigations in Terrell County*, 11.

50 The Fidelity Casualty Company held Sheriff Mathews's bond. Police Chief Howard Lee died before the suit ever came to trial.

Hattie Brazier sued for the alleged wrongful death of her husband under the argument that the defendants had deprived James Brazier of his civil right to life. The suit alleged that James Brazier died from “willful and intentional acts of violence, individually and collectively” committed by the defendants who “had a duty to protect him while in their individual and collective custody.”

Hattie Brazier sought \$120,448 for the price of her husband’s life. Her lawyers determined that Brazier, who was 31 when he died, had had a life expectancy of 33.68 years and had a monthly income of \$300. She also sought \$50,000 in punitive damage, for a suit totaling \$170,448.⁵¹

Convictions for white-on-black crimes in the Jim Crow South were disproportionately rare. A black plaintiff was likely to face an all-white jury and a white judge, who—especially in local or state trials—were likely to side with a white defendant.

The attorney for the registrars was Charles J. Bloch, who had defended the Terrell County Board of Registrars in their voting rights suit. Bloch was one of the most eminent lawyers in Georgia and one of the best connected. The Macon-based attorney was a close friend to U.S. Sen. Richard Russell, the powerful Georgia lawmaker known for his opposition to desegregation. Bloch did not conform to stereotype: he was Jewish and, in that regard, an anomaly as a white supremacist.

Bloch, representing the segregationist Governor Herman Talmadge, had argued against the Civil Rights Act of 1957 before the U.S. Supreme Court. In 1958, the year Dawson first made national news, “Macon’s Lawyer of Year”⁵² published his book *States’ Rights: the Law of the Land*. The dry book, full of intricate legalese, outlined Bloch’s legal opinion that the

51 Brazier v. Cherry et. al legal proceedings, accessed through National Archives at Morrow, Georgia.

52 Charles Julian Bloch personal papers, Middle Georgia Archives, Washington Memorial Library, Macon.

Supreme Court's decision in *Brown vs. Board* flagrantly denied southern states their right to self-government without precedent.⁵³

In *Brazier v Cherry Bloch* asked the federal court to dismiss the case for lack of jurisdiction. In June 1960, federal Judge William Bootle dismissed the suit.

Hattie Brazier's lawyers, Donald Hollowell and C.B. King, appealed that decision to the Fifth U.S. Circuit Court of Appeals. Hollowell and King were two of only a handful of African-American lawyers in Georgia at the time.

Hollowell, as the chief civil rights lawyer in Atlanta, already had an overloaded schedule by the time he and King filed Hattie Brazier's civil suit. While serving as chairman of Georgia's NAACP Legal Redress Committee, he was, along with NAACP Legal Defense Fund attorney Thurgood Marshall, working on a case to desegregate the restaurants in the Atlanta airport. Hollowell was also counsel for Charlayne Hunter and Hamilton Holmes in the case that would lead to desegregation of the University of Georgia in 1961.⁵⁴

Hollowell fought for equal justice for blacks while experiencing discrimination in the courtroom, including judges who turned their backs on him as he argued his clients' cases.⁵⁵ In the courtroom, Hollowell typically played the "good cop" attorney while King served the "bad cop" role.⁵⁶

53 In early 1960, Bloch received a letter from the young son of a friend, who had been ridiculed at summer camp for his anti-integration beliefs. Bloch told the boy:

Don't ever let anybody say in your presence without answer from you that the South knows that segregation is wrong. The South knows no such thing. On the contrary, the South knows that segregation is right.

54 Hollowell, who routinely had sixteen-hour workdays, had an incredibly high volume of cases. Since civil rights cases like Hattie Brazier's were usually financed, minimally, by the NAACP Legal Defense Fund, Hollowell supplemented his income with more routine legal work.

55 Maurice C. Daniels, *Saving the Soul of Georgia: Donald L. Hollowell and the Struggle for Civil Rights* (Athens: UGA Press, 2013) 6.

56 Lecture by Maurice C. Daniels, Decatur Public Library, Decatur, Georgia, February 24, 2014.

King was the only black lawyer based in South Georgia who took on criminal and civil cases. King was known for his eloquence and “virtually photographic memory”⁵⁷ in the courtroom. He was a member of the Albany King family (no relation to Dr. Martin Luther King Jr.), who would become well known figures in the Albany and Georgia civil rights movements.

The two attorneys matched blows with Bloch in a flurry of legal paperwork. The Fifth Circuit Court of Appeals reversed Bootle’s decision on July 7, 1961. For the second time in a case involving Terrell County, Bloch appealed all the way to the Supreme Court and lost. Hattie Brazier’s case would go to trial.

⁵⁷ Mary Sterner Lawson, “C.B. King (1923-1988),” *The New Georgia Encyclopedia*, accessed 3/14/2014, <http://www.georgiaencyclopedia.org/articles/history-archaeology/c-b-king-1923-1988>.

Agitation

Brewing restlessness and mounting discontent over segregation in southwest Georgia erupted later in 1961 with the formation of the Albany Movement in Dougherty County, which bordered Terrell. National civil rights organizations descended upon Southwest Georgia as white Dougherty County law enforcement officials jailed local blacks by the hundreds. The movement attracted national media attention as prominent civil rights leaders like Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. joined the nonviolent protests.

The Albany Movement spilled over into Terrell County in early 1962, when members of the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee announced plans to push their campaign to register black voters outside of Albany and into rural Dougherty, Lee, and Terrell counties. The Southwest Georgia Voter Registration Project leader was Charles Sherrod, who at 25 years old was already a veteran of the nonviolent movement. Sherrod, a black man, was already acquainted with Terrell County, which SNCC workers christened “Terrible Terrell” and “Tombstone Territory.”⁵⁸

When protests in Albany spiked in December 1961, Albany Police Chief Laurie Pritchett flooded nearby southwest Georgia jails with more than seven hundred civil rights protesters in an attempt to avoid overcrowding the Dougherty County jail and drawing attention to the city’s growing tensions. Charles Sherrod and twenty other protesters spent time in the Terrell County jail. There, he first encountered Sheriff Mathews, a named defendant in Hattie Brazier’s suit.

Mathews lined up the prisoners from Albany. “When you come here you lose all your rights,” he barked at them. “This is my jail and I run it like I please.”

58 Faith Holseart, *Hands on the Freedom Plow: Personal Accounts by Women in SNCC* (Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 2012), 121.

When Mathews denied Sherrod's request to lead a group prayer, Sherrod appealed to the officer, "We are still human beings and Christians."

Mathews's response was to club Sherrod in the face. The sheriff told the outspoken prisoner, who stood rubbing his numb jaw, that protesters "would have a hard time changing anything in his county."⁵⁹

Sherrod planned to change Mathews's county through community organizing, rather than direct nonviolent protest. Sherrod described his vision of the Southwest Georgia Project to other SNCC workers as a wheel: "Work in the town of Albany was the hub, and organizing in the outlying counties of Lee, Terrell, and eventually Sumter, were the spokes."⁶⁰ Voter registration was the key goal for these counties; Sherrod and his SNCC colleagues believed the large black proportion of the population had enormous potential for political power.

Although Judge Bootle had issued the injunction against the Terrell County Board of Registrars in 1960, fewer than ten more blacks had registered to vote in the county two years later.⁶¹ After the voting suit, Terrell County's white officials departed from the limelight with no outside pressure to force them to change their ways. The registration process remained in the hands of the state registrars who had been found to discriminate against blacks. Additionally, no system stood in place to nurture and develop a black voting bloc.

As historian Howard Zinn found in his 1962 study of the Albany Movement in southwest Georgia, "the most powerful factors operating against Negro registration still exist in Terrell

59 SNCC microfilm, Charles Jones files, Subsection A, Series IV, Reel 7, 195.

60 Holsaert, *Hands on the Freedom Plow*, 186.

61 Claude Sitton, "Sheriff Harasses Negroes at Voting Rally in Georgia," *The New York Times*, July 27, 1958.

County: the threat of economic reprisals, an atmosphere of intimidation and repression, a history of brutality.”⁶²

The well-publicized death of James Brazier had become part of “Terrible Terrell” County’s reputation by the time SNCC arrived. If SNCC workers were not aware of the case by the time they entered the county, Marion Paige, an Albany Movement officer, told them about it.

Paige, working for a local black mortuary, had picked up James Brazier’s corpse from the Columbus Medical Center for the funeral home. He told SNCC workers that when he lifted the body, the dead man’s broken bones “clicked like dice.”⁶³

SNCC workers were connected to the case because of Hattie Brazier’s lawyers, King and Hollowell. The two attorneys, practically by themselves, were handling the thousands of arrests and unending court battles of the Albany movement.

SNCC workers and the Terrell County black community placed hope in the Brazier case that it might pave the way for equal justice in the region. Jack Chatfield, a white college student from Vermont, recalled years later that he and the other SNCC workers were highly aware of the case as one of the “defining elements” of Dawson at the time.⁶⁴

“These trials are so important because one of the brightest hopes of the ballot is—justice,” SNCC worker Faith Holsaert said.⁶⁵

The pioneering group of SNCC workers—Sherrod and two Albany Movement leaders—entered Terrell County in early 1962 with hopes of expanding the force of the ballot. There, they met local blacks who had already been working to increase voter registration within their

62 Howard Zinn, *Albany: a Study in National Responsibility*, (Southern Regional Council, 1962) 24.

63 Holsaert, *Hands on the Freedom Plow*, 187.

64 Author’s phone interview with Jack Chatfield, February 2013.

65 SNCC papers, Holsaert files, 1962 letter to Wiley Branton of VEP, Subsection A, Series IV, Reel 6, 177.

community. However, their progress was limited by the “atmosphere of fear” uncovered by Baker four years earlier.

Terrell County’s leading local black activist, D.U. Pullum, had run the local chapter of the NAACP almost entirely on his own for decades. Pullum, like James Brazier, was relatively prosperous in Terrell County. He had been the target of violence when, in December 1959, two unidentified white men beat and robbed him in front of his home.

“This will teach you how to respect white people,” the white men had told Pullum.⁶⁶

When a group of college-aged young men and women joined the small Southwest Georgia Project in the summer of 1962, they stood out from Terrell County society because they included blacks and whites working together. Penelope “Penny” Patch, an 18-year-old white girl from New York City, observed that in a segregated world where blacks and whites were not allowed to use the same restrooms, hospital floors, train terminals, or even graveyards, the sight of an integrated group felt to many Southerners “as though way deep down inside of them two broken ribs [were] growing together.”⁶⁷ The inclusion of white students was a controversial matter within SNCC because an integrated group attracted even more attention from southern whites.⁶⁸

The job of SNCC workers in Southwest Georgia was voter registration, voter education, and literacy training within the black community. This work included weekly mass meetings in nearby churches, door-to-door canvassing with SNCC paraphernalia, and persistent

66 NAACP papers on microfilm, Amos Holmes field secretary files, field report dated December 30, 1962.

67 SNCC papers, Patch files, Subsection A, Series IV, Reel 8, 296.

68 White workers attracted more negative attention to already highly noticeable SNCC groups. White men harassed Faith Holsaert, a 20-year-old white woman from New York, on one occasion by yelling “White girl! White girl!” as they drove past Daniels’s house. Patch reported that most of the threatening phone calls the SNCC workers received in the summer of 1962 referenced “that white girl” or “that white boy.”

“It seems to be a feeling with betrayal,” she explained. (SNCC papers, Patch files)

conversations with Terrell County residents—most of whom were petrified of losing their livelihood or, with the memories of James Brazier and Willie Countryman still fresh, their lives.

While Bloch built his defense of Terrell County and Dawson law enforcement officials against Hattie Brazier's civil suit, those same officials defended their home turf against the changes promised by students they saw as trouble-making interlopers.

Although no longer chief of police, Howard Lee still acted with his old brutal authority when he slapped and kicked a 17-year-old in the Terrell County courthouse as the black teenager helped an older black woman register to vote. When Sherrod went to the county registrar's office to pick up voter registration material, an officer threatened to call his superior, who Sherrod referred to as "the infamous captain Cherry." Sheriff Mathews bossed the civil rights leader out of the courthouse.

"We don't know who you are," Mathews told Sherrod. "We can't just let anybody come in here and look anywhere they please."⁶⁹

Mathews's intimidation tactics pushed his county once again onto the national stage. On July 27, 1962, *The New York Times* ran a front-page article by reporter Claude Sitton titled "Sheriff Harasses Negroes at Voting Rally in Georgia." With Sasser as his dateline, Sitton re-introduced the rest of America to Mathews and his deputies.

Sitton had covered a July 26 meeting inside Mount Olive Baptist Church in Sasser, near Dawson, where SNCC workers encouraged black Terrell County citizens to register to vote. As Sitton and two other white journalists in the church watched, Mathews and thirteen other law-enforcement officers interrupted the meeting carrying guns and police batons.

⁶⁹ SNCC papers, Charles Sherrod field report, Subsection A, Series IV, Reel 9, 341, dated February 1962.

“We want our colored people to go on living like they have for the last hundred years”

Mathews told the group of 38 blacks and two white SNCC workers.

The sheriff claimed that none of Terrell County’s blacks were dissatisfied with their way of life. He then asked the group, “Are any of you disturbed?”

They replied, “Yes.”

“Can you vote if you are qualified?”

“No.”

“Do you need people to come down and tell you what to do?”

“Yes.”

“Haven’t you been getting along well for a hundred years?”

“No.”

The sheriff told the group that no one was allowed to register between July and December, directly contradicting Georgia law, and that it would “not be in your interest” to continue the meeting. The sheriff told them he was trying to prevent violence from local whites, whom he “could not control.”

“I don’t appreciate outside agitators coming in here and stirring up trouble.” Mathews said. “I’ve helped more colored people than any man in the South, I reckon.”

Penny Patch, sitting with her SNCC colleagues, noticed that the sheriff actually held back his usual vitriol because of the reporters’ presence. She was relieved that the sheriff didn’t do anything but talk to the group.

Local black leader Lucius Holloway led a prayer during the meeting: “Our concern is not to destroy. Our concern is not to displace or to fight but to build a community in which all our children can live and grow up in dignity.”

The officers shuffled outside of the church as SNCC workers and the aspiring black registrants joined together in a crescendo of the traditional protest song “We Shall Overcome.”

“Their voices had a strident note as though they were building up the courage to go out into the night,” Sitton wrote, “where the whites waited.”⁷⁰

Sitton’s simple and immersive prose hastened Terrell County onto the front page of *The New York Times*. A national audience was shocked to learn of the extent of racial intimidation in the county, which a later *Times* article would describe as “a feudal barony... dominated by a handful of wealthy business men and planters, whose attitudes on the racial issue are typical of the hard-core resistance found here in the South’s Black Belt.”⁷¹

After reading Sitton’s story, U.S. Attorney General Robert Kennedy pushed the Justice Department into action.⁷² In August 1962, the civil rights division of the Justice Department filed its second suit against officials in Terrell County for interfering in voter registration. The suit, which would be dismissed by federal judge J. Robert Elliott, sought an injunction forbidding Mathews and fifteen other white southwest Georgia law enforcement officials from intimidating prospective voters by “disrupting meetings, threatening or committing violence or dismissing Negroes from their jobs.”⁷³

Tensions in the community rose as bad publicity and the ongoing annoyance of SNCC workers continued to incense local whites. Nearly two months after Sitton’s article was published, the small black church that had been the setting for Mathews’s confrontation burned to the ground in an apparent case of arson.

70 Sitton, “Sheriff Harasses Negroes at Voting Rally in Georgia.”

71 “3 Shot in Georgia by Night-Riders,” *The New York Times*, September 6, 1962.

72 Roberts and Klibanoff, *The Race Beat*, 266.

73 “U.S. Sees Threats to Negro Voters: Suit Asks Intimidation Ban in Georgia Registration,” *The New York Times*, August 14, 1962.

Before dawn on September 9, 1962, SNCC workers and local blacks held hands and prayed around the ashes of Mt. Olive Baptist Church near Sasser, Terrell County, consoling one another as they watched the smoke rise. Federal, state and local officials investigated the scene that day and found the cause of the destruction of Mt. Olive and Mt. Mary, another nearby black Baptist church unrelated to voter registration, to be undetermined.

State media raced to cover the story. African-American baseball star Jackie Robinson, who had been visiting the region as a native of nearby Cairo, Georgia supporting the Albany Movement, visited the site. Robinson would later head the Southern Christian Leadership Conference's donation drive to rebuild the burned churches.

"It really makes you want to cry, deep down inside your heart," Robinson told *The Atlanta Constitution*.⁷⁴

For blacks, churches had been places of community bonding for generations, where songs and prayer spiritually strengthened them against the constant weight of economic, social and political oppression. When the Albany Movement began, the leaders in that city and in the Southwest Georgia Project naturally held their meetings in churches, because that was where the community already congregated.

The destruction of the black churches struck the emotions of whites as well as blacks. Because the ruined buildings had been houses of worship, regardless of the congregation's race, their destruction was lamented as a crime more despicable than arson.

Outrage over the burnings spread to the nation's capital. President John F. Kennedy called them "cowardly."

74 Bill Shipp, "Night-Riding Arsonists Burn 2 Negro Churches in Southwest Georgia," *The Atlanta Constitution*, September 10, 1962.

“I don’t know of any more outrageous action which I’ve seen occur in this country for a good many months or years than the burning of a church—two churches—because of the effort made by Negroes to be registered to vote,” Kennedy said.⁷⁵

Eugene Patterson, the editor of *The Atlanta Constitution*, initiated a donation drive to rebuild the churches within the pages of his own paper. He specifically requested no donations from black Georgia residents. Patterson, a white man, believed that white people had probably burned the churches and so white people should be the ones to rebuild it.⁷⁶

Terrell County’s white community hastened to defend its members against outside allegations of violent racism. Carl Rountree, Dawson’s mayor and the editor of the main local news publication, defended his white constituents in a September 13 editorial on the front page of *The Dawson News*. The editorial, titled “Who Profits Most?” purported that the “good white people” of Terrell County were too wary of breaking the 1960 injunction against intimidating blacks and bringing more bad publicity to the area to have burned the churches.

He answered the question posed in the title of his editorial by pointing blame somewhere other than at Terrell County whites:

“The negroes know their churches were old. They know that they are going to be rebuilt larger and better. Let us hope that these new churches will be used for the purpose for which they are intended—the worship and glorification of God—not the vilification of man.”

Sheriff Mathews also placed the blame elsewhere. “The people are disturbed about the outsiders,” Mathews had told reporters after the church burnings. “If they’d leave, things would quiet down again.”

75 Joseph Loftus, “President Denounces Church Fire,” *The New York Times*, printed in *The Atlanta Constitution*, September 14, 1962.

76 Roberts and Klibanoff, *The Race Beat*, 267.

On September 14, Dr. Martin Luther King Jr., visiting from nearby Albany, held a vigil on the site of what had been Mt. Olive Baptist Church. With the support of people—both black and white—from across the state, SNCC workers and local blacks clasped hands with King that evening and prayed on the ashen ground. African-American SNCC worker Prathia Hall, the daughter of a Baptist minister, gave a speech on the theme “I have a dream”—a theme that would stick in King’s memory as he prepared his famous oration for the 1963 March on Washington.⁷⁷

Three days later, another black Terrell County church burned. Unlike the first two incidents, however, investigators quickly caught the perpetrators. Three local white men, along with one white teenager, confessed to setting fire to I Hope Baptist Church and were each sentenced to seven years behind bars.

“We sat around talking about segregation and the burning of the churches at Sasser and Chickasawhatchee,” said 31-year-old construction worker Marvin Milner, whom *The Dawson News* named as the group’s ringleader. “I got mad. I don’t want my children going to school with negroes. So we decided to burn the church.”⁷⁸

The destruction of a church by local whites pushed the Terrell County white community into mimicking Patterson’s campaign. *The Dawson News* editor (and Mayor) Rountree established the rebuilding of I Hope Baptist as a local issue and insisted that Terrell County whites were not seeking outside contributions to their local donation drive to rebuild the church.

“We think this is our job,” he said.⁷⁹

⁷⁷ Holsaert, *Hands on the Freedom Plow*, 180.

⁷⁸ “Three Terrell White Men Confess Burning of Church,” *The Dawson News*, September 20, 1962.

⁷⁹ “Terrell Citizens Start Fund to Rebuild Burned Church,” *The Dawson News*, September 20, 1962.

Rountree, whose venomous September 13 editorial had attempted to place the blame on anyone but Terrell County's white community, consented to serve as chairman of the fund. The white community, which had remained intractable despite multiple federal interventions, appeared uneasy about defending segregation in the face of the public scrutiny from the three church burnings. SNCC worker Jack Chatfield would later recall that Mathews eased up on the civil rights group after the fury of the press from the earlier *Times* article and the arsons.⁸⁰

Although press coverage had ensured that the churches would be rebuilt, their destruction had sent the Terrell County black community a clear message about their bid for political equality. SNCC workers continued to canvass and hold meetings under a tent where Mt. Olive had once stood, but no more black pastors in Terrell County would allow SNCC workers to use their churches for meetings. SNCC workers found that by the time of Hattie Brazier's civil suit, the fires had instilled a fear in local African-Americans that caused them to retreat, rather than unite.⁸¹

⁸⁰ Author's phone interview with Jack Chatfield in February 2013.

⁸¹ SNCC papers, Holsaert files, field report dated March 9, 1963.

Taking the Stand

Nearly five years after James Brazier was carried from the Terrell County jail, bloodstained and comatose, Hattie Bell Brazier faced the law enforcement officials responsible for her husband's death. From February 4-8, 1963, in the federal district court of Americus, Sumter County, African-American civil rights attorneys Donald Hollowell and C.B. King sparred with Jewish white supremacist lawyer Charles J. Bloch to prove that the defendants had, under color of state law, illegally arrested James Brazier and used unnecessary force against him. The attorneys asserted that officers Weyman Cherry and Randolph McDonald had targeted James Brazier because of the color of his skin, and that Sheriff Mathews—who was in charge of the county prison—had knowingly allowed the violence to happen.

Attending the trial were members of SNCC's Southwest Georgia Project. The young men and women were expanding the project into Sumter County that month, but took a break from canvassing to watch Hattie Brazier's stand against the men who reigned over Terrell County.⁸²

Judge Robert Elliott, who had dismissed the injunction against Sheriff Mathews's intimidation of black voters (and who had stymied Dr. Martin Luther King Jr.'s efforts to lead a protest march in Albany), was presiding over the case. The jury had initially had two black members, but Bloch struck them from the panel. The jury would be all white.⁸³

Hollowell and King were missing a key piece of their defense before they stepped foot in the Americus courthouse: Marvin Goshea, the young black man who had been in the Terrell County jail cell with Odell and James Brazier.

Goshea had not been able to give his testimony to the federal grand jury in 1958 because Cherry had locked him in jail. And now, he would be unable to give his testimony in 1963

⁸² SNCC papers, Holsaert files, field report dated February 9, 1963.

⁸³ "Hubby Beaten to Death but GA Jury is Unmoved," *The Baltimore Afro-American*, February 16, 1963.

because he had been found dead two years earlier in a Dawson undertaking parlor from apparent asphyxiation. The FBI investigated his death, but ultimately found no evidence of foul play.⁸⁴

Another witness from that night in the jail, Irene Gladden, had also since died under unknown circumstances. She had recognized James Brazier, calling him by his nickname “Bubber,” when the officers took the man to the woman’s side of the prison. The black female prisoner had spoken to James Brazier through the cell walls.⁸⁵

The only eyewitness for the plaintiffs who was available from that night in the jail was Mary Carolyn Clyde, who had been Gladden’s cellmate that night. Clyde, at nineteen years old and with a fifth grade education, had been in jail since October 1957 for spousal homicide.

When FBI agents first investigated James Brazier’s death in spring of 1958, Clyde told them the only time she had seen the man was when he was walking, unsupported, to Mayor’s Court the next morning. Clyde later smuggled a letter through the prison’s cook to the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP) giving a different account.

“Please don’t you all call my name and I want you all to help me if you all can,” she scrawled in almost illegible, hurried characters.⁸⁶

Clyde wrote that she had seen James Brazier arrive in the jail cell next to hers. She later saw officers take him out of that cell. When they returned the prisoner, she said, he was wrapped in a bloody blanket and would not answer to his own name.

She later told representatives of the NAACP that she could not tell the truth in her first FBI interview, because an eavesdropper was stationed on the porch near where they were sitting. That eavesdropper, Eugene Magwood, was the black prisoner trustee—a selected prisoner given

84 Commission on Civil Rights, *Justice*, 174, footnotes

85 FBI Files on James Brazier, August 2, 1958 Report by Charles Haynes on Investigation.

86 FBI Files on James Brazier, handwritten letter from Mary Carolyn Clyde addressed “Dear Front...”

special privileges and freedoms in exchange for helping the sheriff with his jailhouse duties. Magwood also held the keys to the cells of all the female black prisoners.

Clyde, whose crime should have placed her in the state penitentiary and not in the county jail, told investigators in the summer that she was tired of Magwood taking advantage of her in her cell.⁸⁷ The NAACP found that Clyde was pregnant with the trustee's baby, due to give birth that August. The baby would be stillborn, and Clyde would later deny her pregnancy.⁸⁸

Clyde told NAACP officials that officers threatened to kill her if she told anyone what she'd seen and that they bribed her to keep her mouth shut.⁸⁹ When she first met with FBI agents, Mathews had pushed back her interview time so that he could wash the blood from the cell floor where James Brazier had lain.⁹⁰

Clyde told Hollowell her more complete story and agreed to testify in court against the officers. She told Hollowell how, when the officers returned James Brazier to his cell, Magwood had taken a second look at the unresponsive man and said, "Oh, he's all right."

But when Clyde stepped onto the witness stand in 1963, she became visibly fearful. In the five years between the federal grand jury sessions and the civil suit, the 24-year-old woman had been released from jail. She still lived in Bronwood, Terrell County with her father—less than seven miles from the Terrell County jail in Dawson.

As she sat in the witness chair, staring into the faces of the three law officers who had controlled her life behind bars, Clyde wrung her hands and frowned. Stuttering and mumbling,

87 NAACP papers, Amos Holmes files, "Confidential Report Re: Field Investigation in Terrell County, Ga," 1958.

88 Author's personal interview with Mary Carolyn Clyde in August 2013 (Hank Klibanoff and Brett Gadsden also interviewers).

89 NAACP papers, Amos Holmes files, "Confidential Report Re: Field Investigation in Terrell County, Ga." 1958

90 NAACP papers, Amos Holmes files, "Confidential Report Re: Field Investigation in Terrell County, Ga," 1958.

she denied knowing anything about that night in jail. She said she was asleep the whole night and did not see James Brazier until the next morning.⁹¹

“Every time she would tell a lie for them she would close her eyes,” a spectator at the trial later told a journalist for the *Afro-American* newspaper. “You could tell she was afraid by the way she gripped the chair and the way she could not control the trembling of her body and legs.”⁹²

As he continued to elicit her testimony, Hollowell reminded her that she had told him she was afraid because people were “getting hurt.” She had specifically mentioned Gladden and Goshea. But Clyde continued to deny everything. Frustrated, Hollowell took the unusual tactic of asking the judge to declare her a hostile witness, enabling Hollowell to confront her with the discrepancies in her testimony.

Another witness, Frank Hunter, denied knowing anything about James Brazier’s death. Hattie Bell Williams had told investigators that Hunter, night watchman at the Dawson Compress and Storage Company, had acknowledged to her that he had seen the policemen drag James Brazier to his job site to savagely beat him.

Other members of the Dawson community, both black and white, appeared before the court to testify that they saw James Brazier on April 20-21. One white woman claimed she had seen James Brazier walking to Mayor’s court, unsupported and still in his Sunday suit.

Bloch spent much of his questioning trying to paint James Brazier and his father Odell to the jury as drunkards, and to depict the deceased Brazier as a domestic abuser. A black storeowner with a record of illegally selling whiskey said, with contradictory evidence, that

91 *Brazier v Cherry*, Testimony from Mary Carolyn Clyde, 592.

92 “Hubby Beaten to Death but Ga. Jury is Unmoved,” *The Baltimore Afro-American*, February 16, 1963.

James Brazier had been a frequent customer of his and that he had frequently broken up physical fights between the Brazier couple.

Hollowell stopped the trial at one point by objecting to the defense's courtroom behavior. Bloch's associate, James Collier, was shaking his head and gesturing at a witness. In another instance, Cherry appeared to be coaching a different witness on the stand.

Elliott allowed the behavior.⁹³

The Atlanta lawyer stopped the trial at another moment to ask Elliott to take judicial review of a few facts, including "the fact that in the southwest area and in the county of Terrell, it has been common for colored prisoners to be brutalized and that there was existing there in 1958 a reign of terror."⁹⁴

Elliott declined his request.

On the night before the last day of the trial, 75 SNCC workers and local blacks gathered in a nearby Baptist church. Many of them had been attending the Brazier trial instead of canvassing that week. They sang a freedom song, praying for a victory for Hattie Brazier: "Guide my heart, while I run this race/Cause I don't want to run this race in vain."⁹⁵

At the end of the trial, when all voices by either side had been heard, Elliott spent two hours giving the jury instructions. He charged them with deciding if officers Cherry and McDonald had arrested James Brazier with illegally brutal force, leading to his death.⁹⁶

After spending five days listening to evidence, the all-white jury deliberated for less than an hour and a half. They decided in favor of the defendants.

93 Elliott said that both sides were guilty of making certain movements, although he could not pinpoint a time when the counsel for the plaintiff had gesticulated at witnesses.

94 "Hubby Beaten to Death," *Baltimore Afro-American*.

95 SNCC papers, Holsaert files, letter to Wiley Branton of the VEP.

96 He noted that the Fourteenth Amendment was applicable because the plaintiff's charges of racism.

SNCC activist Agnew James of Lee County, who had attended the trial, declared of the decision, “It makes it right for a white man to kill a Negro.”⁹⁷

Southwest Georgia Project worker Faith Holsaert, a young white woman, declared in a field report the jury’s decision to be “a bad blow, very bad” to SNCC’s efforts in the region. She noticed, “Many...people were moved and angered, but simply discouraged, not rededicated.”⁹⁸

Holsaert voiced her frustrations with the ruling in a letter to the Voter Education Project: “If one ever had the naïve hope that the system had disappeared, the Federal Court sitting in Americus has made quite plain the fact that the system is quite alive, and fostered by some of the ablest minds around.”

After the trial, Hattie Brazier addressed members of the black press who were covering the trial.

“If I never get a penny out of it, I think this case has done some good,” she told reporters. “It has exposed the way police in this part of Georgia operate and what they can do without being punished.”⁹⁹

The story of the case had touched people outside of Terrell County. While working on the case, Hollowell had received a letter from an anonymous white person who had heard that Hollowell was helping Hattie Brazier get compensation for her husband’s death. The anonymous person wrote that his or her father had been a police officer in a small Georgia town similar to Dawson. “I loved him, but he was cruel to Negroes,” he or she said. “I have seen it and it has affected my whole life.”¹⁰⁰

97 SNCC papers, Holsaert files, field report dated February 9, 1963.

98 SNCC papers, Holsaert files, field report dated February 9, 1963.

99 “Hubby Beaten to Death,” *Baltimore Afro-American*.

100 Donald Hollowell Files, Auburn Avenue Research Library, anonymous handwritten letter.

The author wrote that his or her father was not the only police officer responsible for cruelty to blacks in the small town:

“The negroes never had a chance. There seemed to be an unspoken of law among police officers that negroes were to be kept in complete subjection. [sic] They were too, or they were found to be ‘missing’ or beaten and nothing was ever done.”

The letter writer remembered that even as a child he or she had known that the oppression of blacks was “terribly wrong.”

“Thank God for people like you,” the author told Hollowell, “Who will help these people.”¹⁰¹

The writer would not sign his or her name.

“I’m not brave like you,” he or she said to Hollowell. “I’m a coward.”

Hattie Brazier’s civil suit was an act of defiance against the law enforcement officials who represented and enforced the legally sanctioned oppression of African-Americans in southwest Georgia. Her case drew the hopes of the two-thirds of Terrell County’s population who were denied social, economic and political representation because of the color of their skin. The Americus jury’s decision in favor of the police officers who killed James Brazier affirmed the hold of white supremacy on Terrell County and, by example, on similar communities in Georgia’s Black Belt.

101 Donald Hollowell Files, Auburn Avenue Research Library, anonymous handwritten letter.

Conclusion: Defeat

Hattie Brazier wrote Donald Hollowell in 1966 asking for her husband's bloody clothes and photographs, which had been taken as evidence for the suit. She was moving from Georgia to New Jersey to live with her relatives and two of her children.

The last time Hattie Brazier had seen or heard from Hollowell or C.B. King was on the steps of the Americus courthouse on February 8, 1963. The lawyers had then assured her that they would pursue a new trial, but she had not heard anything about it since then.¹⁰²

The two lawyers had filed a motion for a new trial a week after the jury's decision. They asserted that the verdict was contrary to the law, the evidence and the weight of the evidence on both sides. Hollowell and King also maintained that Bloch admitted evidence designed to influence the jury's perception of James Brazier's character, and that Judge Elliott should have declared a mistrial when it appeared that the defense was coaching witnesses.¹⁰³

Elliott denied the motion for a new trial that September. Hollowell and King filed another appeal, but nothing ever came of the action.¹⁰⁴

Hollowell and King soon became consumed in their other civil rights-related legal work. In 1964, King would become the first African-American since Reconstruction to run for a seat in the U.S. House of Representatives from Georgia.

The Albany Movement, which had catapulted the two attorneys to regional prominence, had formally ended in August of 1962 when Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. declared an end to demonstrations. Dr. King and the SCLC transferred their nonviolent protest campaign to Birmingham, Alabama, leaving the movement in Albany with unrealized goals.

102 Donald Hollowell Files (Auburn Avenue Research Library) handwritten letter from Hattie Brazier, 1966.

103 *Brazier v Cherry et. al* legal proceedings (National Archives in Morrow, Georgia)

104 *Brazier v Cherry et. al* legal proceedings (National Archives in Morrow, Georgia)

The Southwest Georgia Voter Registration Project continued in Terrell and other counties, but SNCC workers found that in Terrell County the black community's enthusiasm for the project deflated after the church burnings and the Brazier trial. Voter registration continued hesitantly until December 1963, when nightriders shot and bombed the Dawson home that served as the center of SNCC work in the county. The return of violence further weakened SNCC's relationship with Terrell County blacks as attendance at mass meetings dropped by half.¹⁰⁵

The 1965 Voting Rights Act, which instituted a federal referee to monitor voter registration in the county and made restrictive literacy tests illegal, resulted in more black voters in the county, but blacks would still remain a political minority for decades. The "atmosphere of fear" that Dawson blacks had experienced in 1958 still lingered years later, when Hattie Brazier prepared to leave the region and migrate north.

In her 1966 letter, Hattie Brazier told Hollowell that she had visited Dawson since the trial in Americus. She had found that in the three years since her suit, five more blacks had become victims of police brutality. The widow believed her legal efforts didn't seem to have changed the town at all.

"The only thing I believe will stop them is the lord," she wrote in reference to the law officers. "He got time set for every person that do each other wrong."¹⁰⁶

In the years between the *Brown vs. Board of Education* decision in 1954 and the Civil Rights Act of 1963, federal intervention and media attention forced the South to address its traditions of racial oppression. During the period historian Taylor Branch would deem "the King years" after Dr. Martin Luther King Jr., a national audience watched and read about racial

105 SNCC papers, Southwest Georgia Project files, Subsection A, Series IV, Reel 9, 341, Southwest Georgia Reports and Proposals at the end of 1963.

106 Donald Hollowell Files (Auburn Avenue Research Library) handwritten letter from Hattie Brazier, 1966.

violence, mass incarceration and other tactics by southern white officials to prevent blacks from asserting their rights. Nonviolent protest dismantled Jim Crow by forcing schools, restaurants, pools and other public establishments to integrate.

Although the civil rights movement inspired change in communities across the South during these years, Terrell County's white power structure remained unmoved. Sheriff Mathews ruled Terrell County until his retirement in 1969,¹⁰⁷ and Weyman Cherry remained Dawson's chief of police until he died in a car crash in 1970.¹⁰⁸ The county would not have a black government representative until 1979.

In 1977, the city of Dawson once again caught national attention because of the "Dawson Five"—a group of five black teenagers who were being tried, under the death penalty, for the murder of a white man during a convenience store robbery. The lawyer for the young men widely publicized the case, saying that the local white sheriff had forced them to confess under threat of electrocution, castration and death. Although the case against the Dawson Five was dropped and never went to trial, Terrell County again became a national symbol of an unchanged Jim Crow South—a bastion of white supremacy isolated by miles of Georgia countryside.

But local African-American citizens, with the help of federal legislation, did eventually transform the small rural county. Today, the county's sheriff and the county seat's mayor are black. The year 2013 marked the county's first black history program, in which local civil rights leaders talked about their experiences during and after the "King years."¹⁰⁹

The Brazier family, whose loss had inspired and symbolized civil rights action in the county in the 1950s and 1960s, still harbored bitter feelings about Dawson over 50 years after

107 "Z.T. Mathews, Former Sheriff, Dies Monday," *The Dawson News*, September 20, 1984.

108 "Chief Cherry is Killed in Car Accident," *The Dawson News*, October 29, 1970.

109 Author's phone interview with Eddie Moore, March 25, 2014.

James Brazier's death. Hattie Brazier Polite and Verda Brazier Bush, who survived their mother and two brothers, said in a 2013 interview that they tried to avoid visiting their hometown because of the tragic memories associated with it.¹¹⁰

The two women—now in their sixties—had received a letter from the FBI years earlier. In 2006 the Justice Department reopened over one hundred racially-motivated murders from the 1950s and 1960s under the Emmett Till Unresolved Civil Rights Crime Act—named after the teenager whose brutal lynching in 1955 had shocked the nation. Like most of the families whose loved ones were victims in these civil rights cases, the two daughters of James Brazier were told by the Department of Justice that their father's 50-year-old case was officially and finally closed—still with no resolution.

James Brazier is one of 74 names enshrined in a display at the Civil Rights Memorial in Montgomery, Alabama. The display, which also names Willie Countryman, bears the label "The Forgotten."

Like the other men and women immortalized on the display, James Brazier died in the Jim Crow South under violent and suspicious circumstance related to the color of his skin. His death and Hattie Brazier's pursuit of legal justice proved that civil rights action during the 1950s and 1960s could not shake white supremacy's grip on Georgia's Black Belt. Fifty years later, James Brazier's death remained unjustified and unsettled, but not forgotten.

¹¹⁰ Author's personal interview with Verda Brazier Bush, Sara Brazier and Hattie Brazier Polite in August 2013 (Brett Gadsden and Hank Klibanoff also interviewers).

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