

Excerpt from  
*Dixie: A Personal Odyssey  
 Through Events That  
 Shaped The Modern South*  
 by Curtis Wilkie

to commemorate the  
 50th anniversary of the  
 University's integration

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## Ole Miss.

The two words used by nineteenth-century servants to refer to the matriarch of the plantation became shorthand over the years for the University of Mississippi, the most Southern of schools in the most Southern of states, an institution unreconstructed a century after Appomattox. The grounds of the school were

drenched with the legacy of war. After the battle of Shiloh, a classroom building that had been turned into a morgue became known on campus as the Dead House. Behind Fraternity Row, the remains of unknown soldiers from both sides lay in a common grave, victims of skirmishes in the region.

In 1861, the entire student body enlisted in the Confederate army, rejecting the pleas of the school's chancellor and the advice of Confederate president Jefferson Davis, who compared the specter of sending boys off to war to the "grinding of seed corn of the republic." My great-grandfather's company, the Lamar Rifles, suffered heavy casualties. The other campus unit, the University Greys, was decimated at Gettysburg, cut down to the last man during Pickett's charge. Not even the college town, Oxford, escaped; it was looted and burned by Union troops. A Yankee correspondent traveling with the invading army wrote: "Where once stood a handsome little country town now only remain the blackened skeletons of houses and smouldering ruins."

Midway through the next century, resentment still simmered there. The campus store specialized in Confederate battle flags and other icons of the Lost Cause. One popular item, a decal, featured the symbol of Southern aristocracy, a civilian "colonel" with planter's hat and drooping white mustache and goatee, declaring, "Forget, Hell!" No, Ole Miss did not forget. In 1936, the football team took the name Rebels, and a couple of years later, students began electing a Colonel Rebel to reign with Miss Ole Miss.

In 1958, when it came time for me to go off to college, no questions clouded my judgment. Though my parents suggested that I look at Pa's alma mater, Washington and Lee, or consider a Presbyterian school, Southwestern at Memphis, my heart was committed to Ole Miss. I would be the fourth generation of our family to have Ole Miss connections, following my Civil War-era great-grandfather; my grandfather, the Oxford town marshal, who went on to serve as chief of the Ole Miss campus security; and my mother. In 1947, the summer after my father's death, Mother and I had lived in an Ole Miss dormitory while she completed requirements for her master's degree, so I had explored the school's nooks and crannies as a youngster and felt completely at home there.

From my first Ole Miss football game in 1946, I had been a devout partisan. When the Rebels upset Maryland, breaking a long winning streak by one of the nation's top teams, in 1952, I rejoiced as if the South had won the war; when Ole Miss lost a game, a rare occurrence in my youth, I would take to bed as if stricken by disease. My allegiance ran deep.



I thought the grounds of Ole Miss lovely, a compact campus centered around the Lyceum, a redbrick Greek Revival building dating to the school's founding in 1848. Classroom buildings were set off by long, rectangular lawns, and an expanse of grass and trees, known as the Grove, stretched east toward town, past a statue of a rebel soldier. When I enrolled, it was easy to walk to class or to stroll to the town square in Oxford, where shops surrounded a whitewashed courthouse.

It was not unusual to see William Faulkner on the square, as unapproachable as God. He stood out in a field of blue denim, dressed as he was in herringbone jackets or sometimes in threadbare khakis. But I was surprised by the tiny size of the great man. He seemed far too short and slight to have composed such sound and fury. Faulkner had himself attended Ole Miss and later served as postmaster at the school until an inspector fired him for inattentiveness in 1924. As he stalked away from the job, Faulkner delivered a peroration we were taught in English class: "I reckon I'll be at the beck and call of folks with money all my life, but thank God I won't ever again have to be at the beck and call of every son of a bitch who's got two cents to buy a stamp."

Ole Miss dripped with mystique. Though the school offered enrollment to any graduate of a white Mississippi high school, and tuition, room, and board cost less than \$2,000 a year, Ole Miss had the aura of an exclusive club for the planter class. Wealthy Delta families sent their sons and daughters to Ole Miss as surely as they harvested cotton each fall. Ole Miss functioned as a clearinghouse for the state's political power structure as well as a finishing school for the young women who would marry the elite and preside over their mansions.

Nestled in the Mississippi hills, sixty miles from the nearest city, Memphis, Ole Miss stood as a bastion of the state's establishment, and in my freshman year, the school seemed impregnable...

For eight years, Mississippi managed to evade the *Brown v. Board of Education* ruling while our neighbors were forced into compliance. Ugly crowds in Alabama succeeded in chasing Autherine Lucy from campus after she became the first black student to register, under court order, at the University of Alabama in 1956, but not before she had breached the walls of the all-white institution. The following year, President Eisenhower responded to defiance in Little Rock by sending a thousand paratroopers from the 101st Airborne Division to ensure the enrollment of nine black pupils at the city's Central High School after the Arkansas governor, Orval Faubus, used the National Guard to turn back the children. In the other surrounding states, Tennessee and Louisiana, officials accepted the inevitable and approached the desegregation of their public school systems with relatively little panic. But Mississippi said, Never!

When a Negro man named Clennon King applied for admission to Ole Miss in 1958, officials spirited him away to a mental institution. The next year another colored man, Clyde Kennard, appeared at the registrar's office at Mississippi Southern College in Hattiesburg. Before he could leave the campus, police stopped Kennard for reckless driving; the charges grew more serious after bottles of whiskey were allegedly found in his car. Later, Kennard was accused of stealing several sacks of chicken feed. The case had all the appearances of a setup; nevertheless, Kennard drew a prison sentence of seven years—even though he was suffering from colon cancer. The fates of Clennon King and Clyde Kennard became the subject of jokes, rather than concern, among members of the

Mississippi establishment. Citizens were assured that white sanctity would be preserved in our schools, that Mississippi would never surrender its sovereignty, and heaven help those who might challenge the system.

As a result, we were disbelieving in the summer of 1962 when the Fifth Circuit of the U.S. Court of Appeals ordered Ole Miss to admit James Meredith, more than a year after he had applied for admission in a letter explaining, "I am an American-Mississippi-Negro citizen." Inspired by the promise of John F. Kennedy, Meredith had sent his first communication to the school on the day the new president was inaugurated.

If segregated education in Mississippi was to be broken, Meredith had the credentials to act as the instrument. He was an air force veteran, nearly thirty years old, with perseverance as well as maturity. Instead of acquiescing to a rebuff from the school, he won support from the NAACP Legal Defense and Educational Fund, which had tons of experience in desegregation cases. His was not a routine action. Rather than targeting an inconspicuous country school or an insignificant institution that could be shut down before submitting to integration, Meredith's lawsuit struck at the cradle of the state's power structure.



Blind Jim  
Courtesy of Enterprise-Journal

Until then, our biggest culture shock at Ole Miss had come at the movies. During my sophomore year, a Civil War romance, *Band of Angels*, had played at an Oxford theater. In one scene, Sidney Poitier, in the role of an educated slave, slapped Yvonne De Carlo after the actress—cast as a planter's daughter whose light skin did not betray her mother's black background—vowed to "keep on living a white life." Murmurs of disbelief swept through our college crowd, and we were astounded when black spectators cheered Poitier's blow from their segregated seats in the balcony.

Ole Miss was not accustomed to impertinence from blacks. The school's ideal Negro had long been "Blind Jim," a lovable old man with a white beard and milky eyes who had hung around the campus for sixty years, selling peanuts, dispensing folk stories, and cheering its athletic teams. He liked to boast that he had never seen Ole Miss lose a game. On Saturdays, when a hat

was passed around the football stadium for Blind Jim, it overflowed with greenbacks from alumni warmed with bourbon and goodwill.

In his sesquicentennial history of the school, David Sansing wrote: "The relationship between Ole Miss students and Blind Jim Ivy was genteel racism in its purest form and it broke none of the codices of white supremacy, but their fondness for him was genuine. When he died on October 20, 1955, Ole Miss students and alumni raised more than a thousand dollars to endow a scholarship in his honor. The Blind Jim Scholarships would enable 'Mississippi Negro youngsters to attend Negro institutions of higher learning.' Because of the terrible complexities of race, the young African Americans who would



benefit from the affection Ole Miss students had for Blind Jim could not attend the school he loved and had been a part of for so long.”

Over the years, there may have been other slight transgressions of racial lines; there were rumors that a couple of black students—so light they passed for whites—had managed to attend classes in post-World War II veterans programs. In the 1950s, Stuart Purser, chairman of the art department at the university, was so impressed by a bust sculpted by M. B. Mayfield, a Negro living near Oxford, that he arranged for Mayfield to take informal instruction. The professor secured Mayfield a job as a janitor at Ole Miss, and he was allowed to sit in a broom closet near the art classrooms for several years, listening to lectures and taking notes.\*

But when a black man openly sought to become a student, Ole Miss officials balked. At first, they informed Meredith that he had applied too late. Then they ignored his follow-up inquiries. After he persisted, Meredith was told the credits he hoped to transfer from Jackson State College,\*\* a black school, would be unacceptable because Jackson State lacked the accreditation of the Southern Association of Colleges and Secondary Schools. A requirement that new students provide letters of reference from five Ole Miss alumni also hindered his attempt to enroll. So did a federal judge, sympathetic to Ole Miss, who granted numerous delays for attorneys representing the school.

The Fifth Circuit, which had a no-nonsense record in issuing school desegregation orders, observed that the Ole Miss case was being argued “in the eerie atmosphere of never-never land” and instructed the lower court to get moving. When a trial was finally held, school officials testified that race had not been a factor in considering Meredith’s application. Asked if any Negro had ever attended Ole Miss, the officials swore that they could not answer because, in the words of the dean of student personnel, “I don’t know the genealogical background of every person I meet.” The district judge, a Mississippian named Sydney C. Mize, ruled on February 3, 1962, that “the University is not a racially segregated institution.” He also found that Meredith “was not denied admission because of his race.”

It took a Fifth Circuit panel only four months to overturn Mize’s decision and order the school to accept Meredith. But Ben Cameron, a member of the Fifth Circuit who had not served on the panel, a Mississippian with a segregationist background, intervened by issuing a stay in implementing his colleagues’ decision.

On September 10, 1962, as a new school year was beginning, Justice Hugo Black, speaking for the entire U.S. Supreme Court, enjoined Ole Miss from further delays. An ecstatic Constance Baker Motley, the NAACP attorney who had handled the case, said that day, “This is the end of the road for the university.”

I was still not so sure. After flunking feature writing my senior year—I had been tardy turning in stories and Professor Jere Hoar taught me a lasting lesson about deadlines—I had dropped out for a semester. Under the influence of Kerouac, I went “on the road” to California for a while, then returned to Summit, where I wound up working in a quilt factory.\* The hard manual labor quickly persuaded me to return to school. As a result, I was back at Ole Miss that fateful fall, needing only to pass the feature-writing course to graduate. As the Meredith case mushroomed into a gigantic struggle between the state of Mississippi and the federal government, I thought it quite conceivable that the school would be closed forever and my diploma denied. Even wild talk of secession was in the air.

\*Four decades later, Mayfield’s art was featured by the school’s Center for the Study of Southern Culture and exhibited at Southside Gallery on the Oxford town square.

\*\*Now Jackson State University.

After enduring more than two years of ridicule as a bumbling figure, Ross Barnett seized the opportunity to redeem himself. “We will not surrender to the evil and illegal forces of tyranny,” he thundered in an address telecast across the state three days after the Supreme Court order. Mississippi, the governor said, “must either submit to the unlawful dictates of the federal government or stand up like men and tell them, ‘Never!’”

The old fellow must have been pleased when he saw the headline in the *Clarion-Ledger*: “Place Assured in History for Fearless Ross Barnett.” The piece began in prose as purple as a storm cloud. “The humble plowboy from Standing Pine, leader in his refusal to yield principle to compromise, stands assuredly today on the blazing pages of American history awaiting a challenger to his order to resist.” The author of the article, worked into a personal frenzy over the case, died of a heart attack five days later.

Barnett was assuring a place in history for himself, all right, and the Jackson newspaper and its sister publication, the *Daily News*, were pounding a drumbeat that would climax in armed revolt in a couple of weeks.

The Jackson papers were owned by the Hederman family, a righteous band of brothers and cousins who served as propagandists for the Citizens Council. Stalwart segregationists and laymen in Jackson’s First Baptist Church, the Hedermans appointed themselves moral arbiters for the state. During the Ole Miss crisis, their editorial writers referred to the Fifth Circuit judges as “the nine judicial baboons in New Orleans,” while their columnists continued to tickle their readership with an unrelenting litany of racist jokes involving watermelons and chicken thefts. \*

As far as our household in Summit had been concerned, the Hederman papers might as well have been written in Sanskrit. When I was a child, my mother wouldn’t allow the *Clarion-Ledger* or the *Daily News* on our lawn, much less inside our home. The papers represented everything she opposed in Mississippi. My social views were not clearly formed at this time, but I knew a bad newspaper when I saw one. I liked the name that detractors had for the state’s biggest newspaper: the *Carriion-Lecher*.

I grew up reading a New Orleans newspaper, the *Times-Picayune*. After giving up my youthful infatuation with Mary Cain, I adopted Bill Minor, the *Times-Picayune* correspondent in Mississippi, as a journalistic model. Writing under the byline of W. F. Minor, he captured the essence of Mississippi politics and regularly scooped his rivals in Jackson. Minor cut a striking figure, with prematurely white hair and the bluest eyes I’ve ever seen. He seemed to know everyone in the state. A. J. Liebling, a press critic for *The New Yorker* with a fine appreciation for Southern politics himself, singled out Minor for praise for a series of articles in the 1940s concerning a secret police force named the Mississippi Bureau of Investigation. After the *Times-Picayune*’s exposés concerning the MBI—Minor quoted one source who compared the operation to the Gestapo—the bureau was disbanded.

But another agency, the Sovereignty Commission, was later created to perpetuate segregation and spy on Mississippians, and the commission worked hand in glove with the Hederman papers. Years afterward, Minor was still angry over the arrangement. “The Sovereignty Commission,” he told me, “would send copies of its investigative reports to Tom Hederman, the editor, and he would feed that stuff to one of his columnists, Jimmy Ward or Tom Ethridge, or to a favorite reporter who would write stories accusing people of subversive activities. The Hedermans did the hatchet jobs for the Citizens Council and

\*My take-home pay was \$77 every two weeks. It seemed okay to me since I lived with my parents and ate out of their refrigerator. But my coworkers had limited educations and families to feed. Once during a break, I asked a fellow if the quilt workers ever thought of organizing a union. “Hell, we don’t need a union here,” he said. “We get all the union benefits—a week’s paid vacation and a nice picnic on Labor Day—and we don’t have to pay no union dues.” Unions were viewed with suspicion and often looked upon as Communist fronts.



the Sovereignty Commission. They were part and parcel of the establishment that maintained the system of segregation, and they helped whip up the violence. They were a bunch of mean racists, and during the Ole Miss crisis, you could see Bob or Tom Hederman slipping out of the back door of the governor's office."

Other than for Minor, however, there was little enterprising journalism in the state. The Hedermans' hegemony covered most of Mississippi. Competition came from the *Times-Picayune* in south Mississippi; in parts of north Mississippi, a Memphis daily, the *Commercial-Appeal*, was read. A few small, respectable dailies were scattered around the state, and a brave woman, Hazel Brannon Smith, operated an antiestablishment weekly in Lexington. But the Hedermans and their corps of right-wing columnists fed paranoia in the state and popularized the mantra "Never!"

When the Hedermans, who already owned the *Clarion-Ledger*, gained control of the *Daily News* in the mid-1950s to establish a newspaper monopoly in Jackson, a group of moderate businessmen founded an alternative daily, the *State-Times*. They hired my parents' friend Oliver Emmerich, editor of the *Enterprise-Journal* in McComb, to run the *State-Times*. For the duration of the *State-Times*'s existence, Mother permitted a Jackson newspaper in our home. But the *State-Times* had been driven out of business by the time of the Ole Miss crisis, and Mississippi was left to rely upon the wisdom of Charlie Hills, who wrote a political column for the *Clarion-Ledger* that suggested that the state government was fighting "the unleashed furies of the Congo." Another *Clarion-Ledger* columnist, Tom Ethridge, upped the ante. Ethridge said Mississippi had come under attack by "Asiatic cow-worshippers and African semi-savages not far removed from cannibalism." Florence Sillers Ogden turned from her society beat to praise Barnett for his stand; her column observed that white and colored people "are not and never can be equal."

The *Clarion-Ledger* did not confine its disgust with the Kennedys to its editorial columns. In a front-page article headlined "Robert Kennedy, Jackass Compared," the newspaper reported state attorney general Joe Patterson's support of Ben Cameron, the lone Fifth Circuit judge who kept blocking progress in the Meredith case. "Robert Kennedy criticizing a judge of Judge Cameron's stature," Patterson said, "is like a jackass looking up into the sky and braying at a great American eagle as it soars above." Not to be outdone, Mary Cain saw Communists involved in the Ole Miss plot. In an editorial, written as the crisis deepened, she demanded—in all caps—to know, "WHO IS BACK OF THIS EVIL NEGRO MEREDITH?" That week, "The Weekly Mirror," the *Summit Sun*'s supplement for its colored readers, did not appear.

Meredith made his first appearance on campus on September 20—my twenty-second birthday—accompanied by a Justice Department official and a carload of U.S. marshals. He did not look threatening. Dressed neatly in a dark suit, Meredith carried a small attaché case, as if he had come to close a business deal. He went inside a building where Governor Barnett waited, out of sight of hundreds of curious students. Espousing the doctrine of interposition, Barnett assumed the role of registrar and told the black man that he should forget about coming to Ole Miss.

The federal agents drove Meredith away. Jeering rustled the leaves of the oaks in the Grove. Moments later, Barnett came out of the building. For the first time, an Ole Miss

\*In "Mississippi: The Closed Society," published two years after the Meredith affair, the liberal Ole Miss history professor James W. Silver wrote: "The Mississippi press mounts vigilant guard over the racial, economic, political, and religious orthodoxy of the closed society.... To read the Hederman press day after day is to understand what the people of the state believe and are prepared to defend."

crowd cheered him. But the exhilaration did not last long. Within hours, several members of the university's administration were cited for contempt of court. The endgame had begun in earnest.

After fitful negotiations between Barnett and U.S. attorney general Robert Kennedy, Meredith was brought to Jackson in an effort to register him there, away from the growing hubbub at Ole Miss. The governor refused him again, and thousands of whites who had gathered around the capitol complex hailed Barnett like Caesar.

Meredith reappeared in Oxford the next day. This time he was met by a wall of state troopers who blocked the federal convoy before it could reach campus. Barnett remained in Jackson, prevented from flying to Oxford by bad weather, so Lieutenant Governor Paul Johnson took his place, reading from the interposition script and handing Meredith a document denying him entrance to the school. After a brief shoving match between Johnson and the chief U.S. marshal, a beefy man with a weather-beaten face named James McShane, the federal delegation returned to Memphis. Photos of the confrontation would prove invaluable to Johnson when he ran for governor the following year.

We did not know it at the time, but Barnett had begun to negotiate the terms of surrender. Faced with his own contempt-of-court citation, the governor began to try to cut deals with the attorney general late in September. According to Arthur Schlesinger Jr.'s *Robert Kennedy and His Times*, the attorney general remarked "that he regarded Governor Barnett ... as genuinely loony—that he had been hit on the head by an airplane propeller ... and had never been the same."

In one telephone conversation, Barnett told Kennedy, "We have been part of the United States, but I don't know whether we are or not."

"Are you getting out of the Union?" Kennedy asked.

"It looks like we're being kicked around—like we don't belong to it."

One of Barnett's advisers, a Jackson lawyer named Tom Watkins, attempted to arrange a face-saving solution for the governor. Watkins assured the Justice Department that if one federal marshal pulled a pistol, Barnett would stand aside at the entrance to Ole Miss. Later, the governor decided that one gun would not be sufficient. Barnett appealed to the U.S. attorney general to order dozens of marshals to draw their guns so that it would appear the governor was yielding to a superior force. Kennedy was queasy about a massive display of firearms.

With the details of the staged showdown incomplete, Meredith embarked on another trip to Oxford, traveling in a motorcade from Memphis. Hearing of the imminent confrontation, I joined hundreds of other students gathered along University Avenue at the east entrance to the school. It was a lovely autumn afternoon, and the crowd seemed more festive than unruly. But Barnett was back on the phone to Washington, warning of violence. "A lot of people are going to be killed," Barnett told Kennedy, according to audiotapes of the conversation that were revealed later. "It would be embarrassing to me." The Justice Department turned back Meredith's motorcade before it reached Oxford. The students, who thought they were about to see history made, were told to disperse. "Y'all go back to your dorms," instructed Johnson, the lieutenant governor, riding in a highway patrol car and speaking through a bullhorn. "Y'all go back to your dorms. The nigger ain't coming today."

The next day, a Friday, the Fifth Circuit ordered Barnett to begin paying a daily fine of \$10,000 if he continued his obstruction. Finally, the governor agreed, in a series of secret



telephone calls to Washington, on arrangements to enroll Meredith. President Kennedy took part in the conversations over the weekend; he was nonplussed when Barnett told him, "I appreciate your interest in our poultry program." After completing details for Meredith's registration, the president turned to his brother and remarked, "You've been fighting a sofa pillow all week."

Barnett may have capitulated, but Mississippi had not.

The state was on war footing. Dozens of sheriffs and their deputies, hundreds of self-styled auxiliary policemen, and aspiring vigilantes were prepared to come to Oxford to defend Ole Miss. In a "bulletin," the Clarion-Ledger reported from Tuscaloosa, "A large number of out-of-state cars was reported grouping here ... as rumors spread across Mississippi that many Ku Klux Klansmen were planning to descend upon Oxford and/or Jackson."

Shrill alarms echoed across Dixie. The tocsin was sounded by no less than Major General Edwin A. Walker, a superpatriot who had left the army after being reprimanded for excess in his indoctrination of American troops in Europe on the evils of Communism. Walker had commanded federal forces during Little Rock's desegregation in 1957, and he was sorry for his part in that drama. After retiring from the army, he came home to Dallas and was used as a mouthpiece for the John Birch Society. The federal government, for years his employer, became his enemy. In a radio interview broadcast throughout Mississippi in late September, the general attacked "the Antichrist Supreme Court" and delivered a ringing call to arms:

"Rise to a stand behind Governor Ross Barnett," he urged listeners. "Now is the time to be heard. Ten thousand strong from every state in the Union! Rally to the cause of freedom! The battle cry of the Republic! Barnett, yes! Castro, no! Bring your flags, your tents, and your skillets. It is time. Now or never!" Walker recalled that he had been "on the wrong side" in Little Rock. "This time I am out of uniform, and I am on the right side, and I will be there."

Mississippi was marching toward insurrection. Recognizing the gravity of the situation, my mother sent me a letter in which she was uncharacteristically brusque and economical in her words:

"Son: Your great-grandfather Gilmer set out to fight the federals from Ole Miss with the University Greys, called the Lamar Rifles, nearly a hundred years ago. He didn't accomplish a thing! See that you don't get involved!!!!" She signed it simply "M'ur," a contraction of the word mother I had used as a child. Mother had muddled her history. There were two Confederate units from Ole Miss, the University Greys and the Lamar Rifles. My great-grandfather Gilmer belonged to the latter. But the wisdom of her message was soon evident.

Weeks later, I shared the letter with the historian Walter Lord, who had come to Oxford for research on his book *The Past That Would Not Die*. As a "liberal" student, I had been paired with a couple of reactionary classmates for an interview with the historian. I spoke with Lord freely, on the condition that my family and I remain unidentified. Excising my great-grandfather's name, Lord used my mother's letter in his book. "It was a voice of sanity in what had now become a madhouse," he wrote.

On the last Saturday night of September, the football stadium at Jackson was filled beyond capacity. The regularly scheduled game between Ole Miss and the University of Kentucky had become a sideshow to the desegregation crisis, and the grandstand stirred with tens of thousands of Confederate battle flags. For years, the Ole Miss band had featured an enormous Confederate flag, so large that it covered most of the field, in halftime performances. But there had never before been many banners in the stands; flags blocked views and fans were discouraged from twirling them. But in the midst of the struggle with Washington, the flag had become *de rigueur*. The Stars and Bars flew on the radio antennas of cars and fluttered from windows of homes and office buildings across the state. The stadium was a red-and-blue sea.

In his book, Walter Lord quoted a student describing the din: "It was like a big Nazi rally...It was just the way Nuremberg must have been." The student was me.

At halftime, Ross Barnett came onto the field, and the noise level reached a maniacal pitch as the crowd was informed of the lyrics for a new state anthem. The tune had been taken from Barnett's campaign song, "Roll With Ross," but fresh verses had been written and were flashed on the scoreboard:

States may sing their songs of praise,  
With waving flags and hip-hoo-rays;  
Let cymbals crash and let bells ring,  
'Cause here's one song I'm proud to sing:  
Go, Mississippi, keep rolling along,  
Go, Mississippi, you cannot go wrong,  
Go, Mississippi, we're singing your song,  
M-I-S, S-I-S, S-I-P-P-I!

As the thousands howled, Barnett lifted his arms in triumph. It was an incredible instant. Even as a dubious spectator, I could feel flesh curdling on my arms. I harbored strong misgivings about the governor; I thought he was an idiot. I did not wave a flag and I did not cheer. But I would not have traded my seat for a million dollars. I knew I was witnessing the final convulsions of the Civil War. All the crowd lacked were pitchforks and rifles. That would come the next night.

Unknown to his followers, Barnett had betrayed the resistance earlier in the day, agreeing with the Kennedys on a plan to bring Meredith to the campus that weekend. But the Saturday-night mob knew nothing of this agreement. Quite giddy, the crowd broke into song again, following words printed on leaflets passed through the stadium:

Never, never, never, never,  
No, never, never, never.  
We will not yield an inch of any field.  
Fix us another toddy, ain't yielding to nobody.  
Ross is standing like Gibraltar, he shall never falter.  
Ask us what we say, it's to hell with Bobby K.  
Never shall our emblem go  
From Colonel Rebel to Old Black Joe.



Like most of my classmates, I woke the next day in Jackson a tad hungover, exhausted from the political passions of the previous evening, not knowing that Sunday's false peace would explode within hours. The first inkling of trouble came during the three-hour trip to Oxford. Driving back with my friend Franklin Holmes, we were passed by scores of speeding police cars. When we arrived on campus late in the afternoon, we saw the administration building, the Lyceum, surrounded by several hundred U.S. marshals, wearing white battle helmets and bulletproof vests. The protective gear looked incongruous over their dark business suits.

I'd like to think my journalistic instincts drew me into the crowd gathering on the grass circle in front of the Lyceum; perhaps it was a student's inquisitive nature. At any rate, I was about to get a lesson in mob psychology that had not been taught in the classroom.

Before sundown, the atmosphere had the feel of a pep rally; there were chants of the school cheer, "Hotty Toddy," punctuated by random rebel yells. But as the evening grew darker and more people arrived, the mood grew nasty. A federal force had been allowed to invade Ole Miss and capture the antebellum building that symbolized the school, and I detected both a growing sense of betrayal, directed for the first time at Barnett, and heightened rage at the Kennedys.

Students who had merely been heckling the marshals moved to more disruptive tactics. Though dozens of state troopers were on hand, the officers did little to discourage the taunting. I had the impression the state police felt they had been sold down the river by the governor, emasculated at a time when they had been spoiling to make a stand against the federal marshals.

A student flicked a burning cigarette on the canvas top of one of the military trucks that had conveyed the marshals to campus. When a marshal moved to extinguish the spark, he was pelted with eggs and debris. Another student produced a knife and began jabbing at a tire on one of the trucks. A state trooper helpfully pointed out an air valve as the most vulnerable spot. Rocks sailed and a couple of bottles broke into shards at the feet of the marshals. Still, the Mississippi troopers did nothing to restore order; some of them laughed at the marshals' discomfort.

From across the circle, I heard smashing sounds. A television cameraman had been attacked, his equipment flung away, and the windows of his car broken. The mob had grown fangs. I saw another photographer knocked to the ground. Someone snatched his camera, banging it against the pavement again and again. Blood gushed from a cut on the photographer's head. When a young faculty member attempted to stop the attack, I heard the sickening noise of fist striking skull, a sound I knew from roadhouse fights. The instructor fell, defended by no one. It was nightfall, and with a cover of darkness, more curses and rocks rained on the marshals.

Suddenly, a noise of scattered poppings, muted explosions, broke over our heads, followed by swirls of smoke. The marshals had fired tear gas into the crowd. Like schools of fish, hundreds of students darted in different directions, shouting in panic. To escape, Franklin Holmes and I scampered across the Lyceum circle, now wreathed in noxious fumes.

The first campus riot of the 1960s was under way. Unlike the dozens to come later in the decade, ours was a right-wing uprising. Fleeing, I got my first dose of tear gas. It scorched my face and burned my lungs. I could barely breathe. Coughing and crying, I found refuge

in the lobby of a girls' dormitory, joining a group of stunned classmates. On a television set in the lobby, I saw the visage of President Kennedy, delivering an address to the nation on the Ole Miss crisis. James Meredith was safely on campus, he announced. "This has been accomplished thus far without the use of National Guard or other troops." Invoking a theme he knew was dear to the South—its "honor and courage"—Kennedy talked of the valor "won on the field of battle and on the gridiron." He said there was no reason "why the books on this case cannot now be quickly and quietly closed," and he concluded with a message to the students of Ole Miss:

"You have a new opportunity to show that you are men of patriotism and integrity, for the most effective means of upholding the law is not the state policemen or the marshals or the National Guard. It is you. It lies in your courage to accept those laws with which you disagree as well as those with which you agree. The honor of your university and state are in the balance. I am certain that the great majority of the students will uphold that honor." The president did not know that, minutes before, all hell had already broken out on the Ole Miss campus.

Neither did the faithful at the First Baptist Church back home in Summit. At that hour, they turned their Sunday-evening service into a referendum on the Meredith situation. The congregation unanimously adopted a resolution:

"Whereas, it is our firm conviction that the Word of God endorses the idea of segregation of races.... Whereas, it is our firm conviction that integration of the school system in Mississippi would open an era of bloodshed, immorality, and crime unmatched in the history of our nation.... Therefore, be it resolved that we stand solidly with our governor, Ross R. Barnett, in this solemn hour and pledge to him our loyalty throughout this great ordeal."

Instead of firing a few volleys of tear gas to disperse the crowd, the federal marshals, their patience exhausted, triggered hundreds of rounds. That stirred a wasp's nest. Rumors swept the campus, as insidious as the gas: a popular young woman had been struck and killed by a tear-gas canister; the grounds of Ole Miss were littered with many other student casualties; over the fallen Mississippi bodies, marshals were bringing Meredith to the Lyceum to be registered that night.

Already burning from the tear gas, students were stoked into venomous wrath by the various reports, especially by the word of the young woman's death. As soon as the first rounds of gas dissipated and Kennedy's brief speech ended, crowds surged back toward the Lyceum. The mob's numbers increased exponentially. Within a half hour of the outbreak of fighting, the state troopers—who had maintained roadblocks at the gates of the school to keep troublemakers away—withdraw, leaving the campus open to posses of night riders. Cars filled with students from other schools in the state, eager to join the rebellion and unwilling to let Ole Miss enjoy all the glory of the insurrection, poured onto the campus. So did pickup trucks, driven by seething men armed as if for a deer hunt. Hundreds of others flowed in on foot along University Avenue, carrying shotguns, sticks, rocks, and bottles. A construction project near the Lyceum provided a supply of bricks.

In the center of the Lyceum circle, the Confederate battle flag had been hoisted to the top of a flagpole.

By 9 P.M., control of the riot had passed from the students to the hands of an adult gang.



From my vantage point at the foot of the circle, I watched as disorganized rioters made wave after wave of assaults on the Lyceum. I could hear ham radio units broadcasting appeals across north Mississippi for reinforcements.

Rioters commandeered the university fire truck, using the vehicle to charge the Lyceum. The scene looked like a distortion or a western movie: instead of Indians galloping around an embattled wagon train, the fire truck sped around the circle in front of the Lyceum like a toy out of control. Each time the truck passed the Lyceum, its passengers—clinging to the running boards—threw rocks and bricks and were met with broadsides of tear-gas canisters that struck the truck like heavy hail. After several circuits, the marshals captured the truck and some of its occupants.

Others picked up the fight. Uncoiling fire hoses, they sprayed the marshals' position with powerful jets of water. Although the mob was driven back again, the abandoned hoses continued to thrash and spew about the circle like giant, dying snakes.

Rioters requisitioned a bulldozer from the construction site. A man who looked as though he had just come from a job clearing the backwoods fired the ignition and steered the grinding machine toward the marshals' redoubt. A cluster of insurrectionists marched behind him, pitching bricks into the blackness. They were met with fresh rounds of gas. The bulldozer barged into an oak.

The next assault was by car. Roaring across the grass circle, the driver collided with one tree and caromed into another, disabling the vehicle. I thought it impossible, but the night grew more surrealistic. Gangs uprooted concrete benches from the campus lawns and tumbled the debris onto the streets in an effort to block any convoys that might be coming to rescue the marshals. Inside the Lyceum, Robert Kennedy's press secretary, Ed Guthman, reported on the phone to his boss, "It's getting like the Alamo."

A layer of choking fog enveloped much of the campus. In my role as budding journalist and student voyeur, I wandered the fringes of the war zone, racing away when caught in pockets of gas and returning when it ebbed. I heard the rattle of gunshots and concluded that a firefight was taking place between the marshals and the mob.

Afterward, the federal government insisted that the marshals never resorted to firearms during the long night, a claim supported by a post-riot investigation. But if they had fired back, I would not have blamed them. Their situation, to use a newsman's cliché, was deteriorating rapidly. Through a veil of gas, I could see shadows, men crouching, firing pistols at the Lyceum. Marksmen with rifles climbed into trees to get better angles. Wounded members of the federal force fell at the foot of the building, exposed to further fire until they could be dragged inside by other marshals. Some in the mob dropped, too, struck by stray bullets.

Because no ambulances could fight their way onto campus, private cars were used to carry the wounded to the Oxford Hospital. I saw the mob block one car containing a bleeding marshal. The group finally allowed the vehicle to pass after determining the passenger might be dying. Such were the rules of war that night.

Nearly four hours after the riot began, the first reserves came to the marshals' rescue. A convoy of jeeps and trucks loaded with men in military gear tore out of the smoke along University Avenue and rounded the circle leading to the Lyceum. They were showered with bricks and bottles. A Jeep bounced off one of the concrete barricades, but kept moving. The next day, we learned the members of the relief unit belonged to the Oxford National Guard; they were local merchants, insurance salesmen, and mechanics who had

been put under federal orders to reinforce the marshals.

News of the coed's death proved to be untrue, but other reports were verified. The body of a foreign reporter had been found behind the campus YMCA. Another man, identified for posterity as a "jukebox repairman" from Oxford, was shot to death while watching events from the edge of the Grove.

When the melee began, several cars had been abandoned at the Lyceum circle. Thwarted in their attempts to storm the administration building, the mob directed its fury on the cars. They turned the vehicles upside down, then torched them. Flames licked from the windows, and burning wires caused the car horns to bleat mournfully.

Next, I feared, they would set fire to our buildings.

Ole Miss, a seat of Southern hospitality where the student motto had been Everybody Speaks, was being sacked by vandals from our own state.

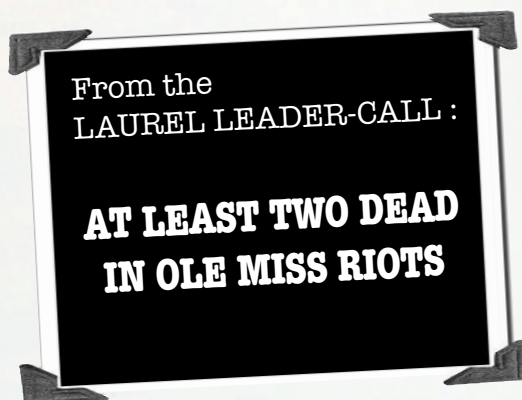
I was not wise enough to perceive my own risk and stayed on the perimeter of the action for hours, enthralled by the bloody battle. During an interval in the fighting, Franklin Holmes and I spotted a face that had become familiar in the days leading to the riot. It was General Walker, standing near the Confederate monument, wearing a Texas cowboy hat and a dopey expression. In fact, he looked a bit dazed, as if he had swallowed a handful of tranquilizers. "Hell," I said to Franklin, "let's go talk to him."

We introduced ourselves to Walker and asked his assessment of the night. The general responded genially, saying the riot represented a great public outcry against the Kennedy administration. All the blood that would be spilled this night, Walker said, would be on the Kennedys' hands.

The old soldier asked us if the marshals were using bullets or buckshot to fight back. Since I was an ROTC washout, I knew little about weapons or military strategy and pleaded ignorance. "The marshals are clearly disorganized," the general offered, suggesting that they were probably running out of tear gas. If the mob wanted to overrun their position, he said, they should employ a flanking movement and attack from the south side of the Lyceum instead of constantly throwing themselves into a line of tear-gas fire at the front of the building.

Before the marshals could be overwhelmed, thousands of soldiers began arriving after midnight. Army trucks carrying troops in battle gear began lumbering onto the campus from different directions. They came down University Avenue and they came up Sorority Row, weathering barrages of rocks and bricks and Molotov cocktails. Bearing rifles with bayonets, helmeted soldiers swarmed through a western gate near a dormitory where Meredith had been sequestered throughout the night. Few of the rioters realized Meredith was there, or they might have redirected their attack from the Lyceum to his dormitory. Overhead we could hear the drone of a massive airlift, as troop transports descended, one after another, on the Oxford airport.

Franklin and I decided it was time to go back to the SAE house. Inside, there was





[illegible]

bedlam. Many of our classmates were waiting to use the lone telephone to let their anxious parents know they were not among the casualties. In the distance, we could still hear the crump of tear gas, coupled with unearthly howling.

After dawn, platoons of paratroopers, working at bayonet point, finally drove the rioters off the campus. Skittering through side streets, the mob tried unsuccessfully to regroup in downtown Oxford. In the mopping-up operation, scores of men with no connection to the university were arrested. One of them was General Walker.

By the time the battle was over, the campus reeked of tear gas. I expressed my dismay in a disconsolate letter I wrote home a few hours later, on Monday evening: "Dear Folks: It is rumored that we are now under martial law and that a 7 P.M. curfew is to be imposed." I gave a detailed ten-page account, written on lined notebook paper, of the riot the night before. I illustrated my story with a map showing the major points of conflict.

Thousands of troops were now on campus, I noted. "About a third of the campus population has evacuated. Others are leaving all the time. Classes have been forgotten. The semester is irreparably damaged."

I made my judgment: "No one is guiltless. Neither Barnett, the Kennedys, the Federal marshals, the Mississippi law officers, the NAACP, the Citizens Council. I hope they are happy because they have all contributed greatly to the ruin of our university.... Right now it is impossible for me to attempt to salvage an education out of this mess. The mood is generally one of despair here. The campus is blockaded at all entrances as is downtown Oxford and all roads leading to the town."

After assuring my parents that I would not get involved in further trouble—I pledged to stay inside "because a gun battle between rednecks and troops might explode at any minute"—I added a postscript as though it were a news bulletin:

"I can hear tear gas bombs exploding across the campus. No one seems to know why.... Jeeps incessantly patrolling the streets by the dozens. One tear gas bomb exploded in front of our house for no apparent reason. The troops are surely getting nervous. Planes, planes, planes overhead."

The final toll was two dead, countless wounded. Newspaper accounts simply said that "hundreds" were hurt. Various figures were published for the number of soldiers used to put down the riot, perhaps as many as thirty thousand. They never called it martial law, but Ole Miss lived under military occupation for my final semester. Despite my gloomy prediction, I completed my requirements and Meredith attended classes without further violence.

The might of the federal government had prevailed. The back of resistance in Mississippi had been broken, just as it had a century earlier when Vicksburg fell. But the state would continue to lash out, like a wounded animal, for several more years of blood and fire and terror...

I returned in 1990 to a reunion of journalism school graduates at the University of Mississippi—my first visit to my alma mater in a decade. In the years since I'd moved from the state, I'd had little association with Ole Miss. My memory was jaundiced by the events of my senior year. I remembered Ole Miss as a place caught in time, the last stronghold of the old Confederacy. Instead of remembering strolls through the groves of academe, I had recollections of the acrid smell of burning cars and tear gas. Nearly thirty years had passed, but I was still resentful. With a few notable exceptions, the university's



administration and faculty had been too meek to stand up to the politicians in 1962, and I felt estranged from the campus where I had first lived as a child and later as a student.

For the visit to Mississippi, all three of my children flew to join me, and their presence improved my disposition considerably. Visiting the campus, I realized the school was making a good-faith effort to change. The job obviously could not be done overnight; it might take decades, but Ole Miss finally seemed to be looking to the future rather than the past. Judging from the student newspaper, the bulletin-board notices, and the modern curriculum, the place had become relatively hip. Clusters of black students walked through the Grove, a setting of magnolias and oaks where Confederate soldiers and the irregular troops of the twentieth-century rebellion had once mustered. The journalism school, which had occupied classrooms in temporary World War II huts when I'd enrolled there, had grown dramatically, moving into a prime location overlooking the Grove. I was delighted to see that Jere Hoar, the professor who had flunked me in feature writing, was still around, giving a new generation of students an appreciation for writing and deadlines. Though I had feared him in the classroom, I now considered Jere an old friend.

A highlight of the weekend was a Saturday dinner, climaxed by an auction of memorabilia to raise money for the journalism school. I contributed an original cartoon by the Globe's Paul Szep featuring Billy Carter. It had hung on my wall for years, but since Billy's death, I found it too depressing to look at. As the auction proceeded, I won the bidding for copies of the Memphis newspapers on the day Elvis died. But the item I really wanted was a photograph of Faulkner on horseback, taken by my classmate Ed Meek. The competition narrowed to two bidders, myself and a stout conservative I had never met. When I raised his second bid, he countered with a higher figure and shouted, "We can't let this Yankee take Mr. Bill above the Mason-Dixon Line."

Jesus, I thought, I stand guilty of many things, but I deny categorically that I am a Yankee. In the end, I won the bidding and packed Mr. Bill for New England. I would put him up against Hawthorne and Melville any day.



### About the Author

*Curtis Wilkie is an Overby Fellow and Associate Professor of Journalism.*

**Curtis Wilkie**, 1963 graduate of The University of Mississippi with a degree in journalism, worked as a newspaper reporter and editor for nearly 40 years. Most of his career was spent as a national and foreign correspondent for *The Boston Globe*. Following his retirement, he began teaching at Ole Miss in 2002. He has written for many national magazines and is the author of three books, most recently, *The Fall of the House of Zeus*.

