

Los Angeles Times
July 10, 2005 Sunday

BOOK REVIEW; Part R; Pg. 5
LENGTH: 692 words

All Was Right--and Wrong--With the World

Son of the Rough South: An Uncivil Memoir Karl Fleming PublicAffairs: 434 pp., \$26.95

David J. Garrow, David J. Garrow is the author of "Bearing the Cross," a Pulitzer Prize-winning biography of the Rev. Martin Luther King Jr., and an editorial advisor for "Reporting Civil Rights: American Journalism 1941-1963."

Karl Fleming served as Newsweek's "point man on the civil rights beat" in the Deep South from 1960 until 1965. Then he shifted to the magazine's Los Angeles bureau, only to discover with amazement, as he writes in this emotionally gripping new memoir, that "the city was in real senses more segregated than Mississippi."

Covering white segregationists' attacks on black protesters was dangerous for journalists, even for a burly, white Southern tough guy like Fleming. When James Meredith desegregated the University of Mississippi in October 1962, with dozens of federal marshals fighting off a violent white mob, Fleming was in the midst of the action. Two bystanders were killed, and Fleming writes, "I had four bullets stitched in a white wood column six inches from my head that night as I watched the Ole Miss riot from the entrance of the administration building."

Neither that nor any other confrontation in the South represented Fleming's closest brush with death. After his move to Los Angeles, Fleming covered the Watts riots unscathed in August 1965, but nine months later he returned to the neighborhood when Stokely Carmichael, a firebrand leader of the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee, helped energize angry new protests. At one rally, Fleming found himself being "fingered as a white intruder in Watts" by "none other than my old friend -- or so I thought -- from the South, Stokely Carmichael."

Fleming was justifiably proud of his civil rights journalism record, so Carmichael's verbal assault was a rude surprise. But far worse was in store when an unknown attacker took advantage of the turmoil on the streets later that day to club Fleming from behind with a 4-by-4-inch piece of lumber. The blow to his head knocked Fleming unconscious, fractured his skull and broke his jaw. A wire-service photo showing him lying prone in a pool of blood appeared in countless newspapers. Oddly, that picture was Fleming's greatest moment of fame, for in the 1960s Newsweek did not use bylines. "Except in the places where we lived, and worked," Fleming recounts, "news magazine reporters were all but anonymous," and his courageous reporting appeared in Newsweek's pages without his name ever being attached.

The Watts assault left more than physical scars. Although Fleming realized that his assailant "didn't know who I was and what I had stood for and fought for," he was mortified to find that "for the first time in my life, I was frightened of black people." Yet he ruefully understood that in Watts he "was just another faceless exploitive whitey, someone to hate, and hurt. This reversal was a bitter shock."

The six years before that clubbing had been intense and draining, Fleming writes. He was "working twelve to sixteen hours a day, every day" while living "in a constant state of tension," sleeping "too little," drinking "too much" and feeling "ragged and edgy all the time." But he also knew that he was "alive as I had never been before."

That pace and intensity took a cumulative toll, especially on someone who earlier in life had witnessed more than his fair share of emotional turmoil. Born into poor circumstances in rural eastern North Carolina, Fleming was 6 months old when his father died. He was 8 when his struggling mother placed him in a Methodist orphanage, where he successfully overcame his shame at having been sexually abused at age 5 by several older boys.

That embarrassing memory helped generate Fleming's tough-guy demeanor, but after the attack in Watts, his sense of journalistic mission weakened. He left Newsweek in 1972, but his hope of publishing a weekly Los Angeles newspaper foundered when his financial backer withdrew. That failure threw Fleming into a "dark depression" and increased his dependence on marijuana.

Fleming worked for CBS News as an editor and producer from 1978 until 1986, but "I knew deep down that I would never again feel so in the right place, at the right time, doing the right thing as I had during the civil rights movement."

"Son of the Rough South" is a powerfully vivid testament to how compelling the civil rights struggle was for participants and journalists alike. *

PHOTO: SUDDENLY THE VICTIM: In 1966 Watts, Karl Fleming is attended to after being clubbed. PHOTOGRAPHER: Associated Press