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Two Books Focus on the Struggle for Civil Rights in Mississippi

By **David J. Garrow**, author of "Bearing the Cross," a Pulitzer Prize-winning biography of Dr. Martin Luther King Jr.

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Let the People Decide: Black Freedom and White Resistance Movements in Sunflower County, Mississippi, 1945-1986

By J. Todd Moyer. University of North Carolina Press, 281 pages, \$55, \$19.95 paper

Divine Agitators: The Delta Ministry and Civil Rights in Mississippi

By Mark Newman University of Georgia Press, 352 pages, \$54.95, \$22.95 paper

Sunflower County in the Mississippi Delta is one of the South's most storied locales. Parchman Penitentiary, an infamous prison, is located there, and the Citizens' Councils, the region's top segregationist organizations of the 1950s and '60s, were founded in Indianola, Sunflower's county seat. Two of the civil rights era's most notable figures, black activist Fannie Lou Hamer and segregationist U.S. Sen. James O. Eastland, called Sunflower home. Yet contemporaneous news coverage of the civil rights movement and subsequent histories largely ignored rural hot spots like Sunflower while lavishing attention on big cities like Atlanta and Birmingham, Ala.

Now those long-standing oversights are gradually being corrected as books like "Let the People Decide," J. Todd Moyer's valuable history of black activism in Sunflower, begin to add new richness and complexity to what otherwise seems like an all-too-familiar story.

Cotton plantation barons like Eastland had long used Sunflower's rich, dark soil to accumulate huge fortunes, but poor black field hands who toiled long hours at backbreaking work lived in circumstances not far removed from their slave ancestors. Even as late as 1960, more than 6,200 of Sunflower's 11,800 homes lacked flush toilets, and as cotton farming became increasingly mechanized, the need for human labor sank and a steady stream of blacks migrated north.

In the early 1950s, Sunflower's lone black professional, Dr. Clinton Battle, led a registration campaign that put more than 100 new black voters on the county's almost-all-white rolls. When the U.S. Supreme Court handed down its landmark school desegregation ruling, *Brown vs. Board of Education*, in May 1954, Sunflower's chapter of the NAACP anticipated a surge of progress.

Brown did not spawn any immediate segregationist backlash, but once whites realized how inspired blacks were by the court's decision, the Citizens' Councils grew with alacrity. When the organizations sponsored a state constitutional amendment authorizing the Legislature to abolish public schools in order to avoid integration, Sunflower's electorate voted 2,465 to 78 in favor.

Council pressure forced Battle to leave the county, and by 1958 black activism in Sunflower had all but ceased.

Four years passed before Charles McLaurin, a young Mississippi native who was one of the first staff members of the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee (SNCC), chose Sunflower for a new voter-registration effort because of its notoriety as Eastland's home base. McLaurin and several colleagues started in Ruleville, Sunflower's second-largest town, thanks to earlier contacts made by Bob Moses, SNCC's pioneer in Mississippi. At first they received a cool reception from local blacks and predictable hostility from whites, but within several weeks their patient, door-to-door canvassing yielded a few brave souls willing to make the all-but-futile trip to Indianola to attempt to register.

One of their earliest recruits was Hamer, a plantation worker whose family was immediately evicted when the owner learned of her temerity. Hamer's remarkable singing at rallies made her a standout figure as the Ruleville movement grew, and by early 1963 hundreds of residents had tried to register. Mississippi's voter-registration test gave white registrars almost endless opportunities to reject black applicants, and by mid-1963 only 11 Ruleville blacks had made it onto the county's voting roll.

The real work of the civil rights movement took place in obscure towns like Ruleville, with SNCC's canvassers putting in "sixty-hour weeks full of thankless, plodding work whose rewards could be realized only in the distant future," Moye writes. "[T]heir work went all but unnoticed outside the county and outside of SNCC," he adds, but when SNCC in early 1964 organized the Mississippi Freedom Democratic Party (MFDP) as a participatory alternative for the hundreds of thousands of blacks who remained excluded from the official electoral process, Ruleville was a vibrant contributor.

The 1964 Freedom Summer, when SNCC brought hundreds of Northern white volunteers into Mississippi and the MFDP challenged the all-white state party delegation at the Democratic National Convention in Atlantic City, was the high point of the Mississippi movement. Hamer appeared before the convention's Credentials Committee and on live, national TV as a memorably compelling spokeswoman for the MFDP challengers. But the Mississippi activists were sorely disappointed by the token compromise the convention offered them, and in Sunflower, as in most of Mississippi, movement morale slumped badly during fall and winter 1964-65.

In the aftermath of the convention disappointment, SNCC's efforts in rural locales like Ruleville waned dramatically. One internal memo cited " 'the despair and subsequent apathy of some people who have been working hard for over two years and who don't see any change. Some people have been down to register fifteen, eighteen, even twenty-three times' without success." When the new federal Voting Rights Act became law in August 1965, Southern registration tests were swept aside, but in deference to Eastland, federal registrars who were sent to many discriminatory Southern counties were not assigned to Sunflower.

As SNCC's presence in Mississippi faded, a new civil rights organization that many histories simply overlook moved to fill the vacuum. The Delta Ministry sprang to life in late 1964, sponsored by the National Council of Churches as a way to continue the movement activism that dozens of young Northern ministers had first undertaken during Freedom Summer. The National Council of Churches envisioned "a long term commitment of at least a decade and perhaps two,"

and Mark Newman's thoroughly original 2003 book "Divine Agitators" traces the history of what by early 1967 was "the largest civil rights group operating in the South."

The Delta Ministry's name suggested church-based activism, but SNCC's experience already had demonstrated "the general reluctance of black Mississippi clergy to support the movement." The National Council of Churches hoped its program could reach out across the racial divide to white Mississippi congregations, but home-state denominational leaders voiced only "opposition and rejection."

The availability of new federal anti-poverty funds played an ironic role in stoking competition and divisiveness among Mississippi activists. The Delta Ministry, in close alliance with the MFDP, helped support the Child Development Group of Mississippi, which launched Head Start programs for preschool children at more than 80 locations in two-dozen counties. But an intensifying divide between the independent-minded MFDP and NAACP loyalists who were far more open to working with newly emerging, non-segregationist whites, produced internecine struggles in Sunflower and many other counties over who would receive the government grants.

Moye and Newman both note how economic conditions for blacks in delta counties like Sunflower worsened significantly during the late 1960s, in part because the 1967 extension of the federal minimum wage to farm workers "accelerated black agricultural unemployment and displacement from the land as plantation owners found it more economical to replace workers with machines and herbicides." The Delta Ministry pursued active projects in a host of counties, but beginning in 1967, Owen Brooks, its new director, sought to transform it "from a group of uncoordinated county projects to a focused, cohesive program that fostered black economic development, educational opportunity, and independent political power."

Brooks had grown up in a West Indian family in the Roxbury section of Boston and trained as an electronics engineer, not a minister. He epitomized the largely Northern and increasingly secular core staff at the Delta Ministry, and Newman argues convincingly that the low-key radicalism of key staffers inflamed a growing insider/outsider division within the organization. "The black Mississippians were far more willing than the Ministry's leaders, especially Brooks, to work with the NAACP and white Mississippians, and in this they were in tune with majority black opinion in the state."

But ideological differences were not the Delta Ministry's most pressing problem once the National Council of Churches member denominations, whose erratic financial contributions kept the organization afloat, increasingly lost interest in the late 1960s and early 1970s. In 1971 the staff shrank to just four people, and it became all too clear that the Delta Ministry "lacked the resources to make any significant impression on poverty" in the delta counties.

Newman rightly says that "the Delta needed a coordinated approach to job creation," given the persistent lack of employment opportunities, and for most blacks, emigration north continued to offer the best option. By the mid-1970s the MFDP and the Delta Ministry had withered away, and counties like Sunflower "remained bedeviled by poverty, illiteracy, health problems, poor educational opportunities, a low skills base, and little industry" notwithstanding the legal changes won by the movement.

"Divine Agitators" ends on a pessimistic note, but Moye's book carries Sunflower's story forward into the 1980s and '90s. In 1977, at age 69, Hamer "died with a broken spirit, bitterly disappointed" at how intraracial conflict had hamstrung post-1964 movement efforts. Moye

highlights how beginning in the mid-1970s, the gradual emergence of a small black middle class "created more common ground between black and white residents of the county" and culminated in the appointment of the first black schools superintendent in 1986.

Longtime County Court Clerk Jack Harper, once a leader of the Citizens' Council, morphed into a supporter of the local NAACP chapter, and Moye expresses fascination at the "ideological journey" that had transformed "the hateful man I saw in . . . documents" from the 1960s into "the generous man I knew from the courthouse." The development of large-scale catfish farming and processing generated new jobs, but extensive family ties to Northern cities like Chicago led to "imported gang activity and created new networks in the drug trade," Moye reports. "The distribution and use of crack cocaine put a terrible strain on countless families in Sunflower County," just as in major metropolises.

Four decades after Charles McLaurin first moved to Sunflower, he is now assistant director of public works for the town of Indianola. Sunflower and the other delta counties are certainly far better places than they were in 1962, but books like Moye's and Newman's highlight how the wonderful changes wrought by the civil rights revolution have not eliminated the economic disadvantages that continue to define so many lives in rural Mississippi.

PHOTOS (color): (Book covers.)

PHOTO: Civil rights activist Fannie Lou Hamer leads delegates from the Mississippi Freedom Democratic Party in song at an Atlantic City church before the group challenged the all-white state party delegation at the Democratic National Convention in 1964. AP file photos.

PHOTO: U.S. Sen. James O. Eastland of Mississippi in 1956. Like Hamer, the staunch segregationist was from Sunflower County.