

Vernon Dahmer – the pioneer of pioneers

By Meredith C. McGee
Jackson Advocate Contributing Writer

On January 15, 1966, a photographer captured the sullen expressions on the faces of the people coming down the steps of Shady Grove Baptist Church in the Kelly Settlement on the outskirts of Hattiesburg, Forrest County, Mississippi.

The funeral attendants had on their Sunday best, but there was nothing good about paying final respects to another hero whose life was cut short during the civil rights movement.

The heroism of Vernon Dahmer was unmatched. He was the pioneer of pioneers when it came to civil rights. He was organizing Mississippi blacks through the NAACP to break the chains of White Supremacy after WWII in Forrest County which was one of the worse areas in the state in terms of race relations.

Advocating for the rights of blacks in Mississippi in the 1940s was revolutionary, was scary, but when Vernon Dahmer got up from the kitchen table, he was about the business of making a living, taking care of his family, and uplifting the conditions of his race. Vernon and Medgar Evers created a Youth Chapter. Its famous leader was Clyde Kennard who tried to integrate the University of Southern Mississippi in 1959. Vernon collaborated with other civil rights groups too. SNCC worker Hollis Watkins and other youth stayed on the farm and facilitated voter registration drives in the early 1960s.

I was honored to have the great fortune of interviewing Dennis Dahmer earlier this month. On January 10, 1966 – the day their father died, Harold C. Dahmer, age 24, had just returned from active duty, Dennis (12), and his sister Betty (10)

were asleep while their father ran from room to room engaged in a gun battle with two car loads of Klansmen.

Dennis said, “My daddy had six boys and one girl. Local whites sat on the Draft Board and strategically drafted daddy’s sons to take away his help; five of them were in the military at the time of his death.”

“During dinner every evening, daddy asked us what we had done that day and he would tell us what needed to be done,” he added. Dennis recalled, “After dinner, we were required to watch the news with our parents and to be quiet while daddy read the local newspapers including the *Pittsburg Courier*, and the *Chicago Defender*.” He added, “Daddy was well informed.”

“My daddy was a self-sufficient, successful business man,” Dennis noted. Vernon operated a grocery store, sawmill, and planer mill. He hired local blacks to work for his farming and logging operations. His largest cash crop was cotton which he marketed commercially. His customer base consisted primarily of local whites, who respected his business savvy but disliked his involvement in civil rights.

Vernon Dahmer was the Sunday School superintendent and sang in the choir at Shady Grove Baptist Church. His store was used for civil rights activities, and his voice was used for the social and economic advancement of Colored people.

Local whites set road blocks in Vernon’s way to discourage his activism. They persuaded Citizen’s Bank not to loan him funds for his farming operations, shot in his place of business, threatened his life, posted Klan posters along the road, and

constantly harassed him. However, Vernon was able to borrow money for his farming operations from private individuals. “Mama taught school from 1940-41 to 1959-60 in Forrest County. After the school system refused to hire her in the new school system, mama found employment in an independent school district in Richton,” Dennis recalled. Ellie Dahmer was rehired in Forrest County in 1978.

For decades, Vernon went around the road blocks local whites set in his way. Reputed Klansman Sam Bowers was outraged that Vernon offered to collect poll taxes for local black registrants and Bowers ordered his henchmen to firebomb the Dahmer farm house at 2 a.m. that morning. Vernon fought the group ferociously and they retreated. His wife and three children escaped through the back window. He escaped too, but died later that day.

For over 30 years the family lived with the reality that Sam Bowers got away with ordering Vernon’s murder. Bowers was convicted of Vernon’s murder in 1998. He died in prison in 2006. State lawmakers acknowledged the state’s racist past and honored Vernon 50 years after his death at the State Capitol in Jackson, January 10, 2016.

Dennis appreciates lawmakers, but he and his family missed those previous things most people take for granted. Vernon’s absence was missed at the kitchen table, in the choir stand, at the civil rights meetings, and on the farm. “Our number one priority after daddy’s murder was getting justice in the courts. Some of his murderers were convicted early on,” he noted. The investigative journalist work of Jerry Mitchell was revealing. “He did his job,” Dennis said referring to Mitchell.

When I asked Dennis what was his father’s vision for Mississippi was, he said:

Daddy believed all citizens who worked in Mississippi and paid taxes should have the same rights. He felt Blacks, who were second class citizens, could achieve fairness through the ballot and the courts. Back then, our blackness kept us from voting, dining in, and earning fair wages.

Today, many Mississippians don’t earn a living wage. Mississippi has more Black elected officials than any other state in the union but they have to work with other elected officials (that represent different constituencies) who are willing to work with Black elected officials and all be willing to compromise on their positions for the greater good of everybody. Elected officials should spearhead economic opportunities for their constituencies.

We see a lot of political polarization with officials holding extreme positions unwilling to compromise on hardly any issue, even if that issue will benefit their own constituency, case in point, Affordable Health Care Act (Obamacare). Ordinary people feel neglected. A lot of people are working two jobs trying to make ends meet.

Vernon Dahmer, the son of George Dahmer, and the grandson of Warren Kelly, was the eighth of 12 children. He is one of the biggest heroes from the 20th century. He represents black history, Mississippi history, American history; his story should be in the mind of students worldwide.

A narrative of his story is in the book “Local People: The Struggle for Civil Rights in Mississippi” by John Dittmer. In Vernon’s own words, he expressed, “If you don’t vote, you don’t count.”



George W., Martinez A., Vernon F. (Jr.), and Alvin H. Dahmer on emergency leave



Picture taken at Vernon Dahmer’s funeral in 1966: (front) Blondell Dahmer (wife of Carrol), Martinez, Ellie J., Vernon, Jr., Bettie, and Kerry Fielder (family friend); (back) Carrol, George, Harold, Alvin, and Dennis.



Vernon F. Dahmer on cotton picker



Vernon F. Dahmer during fishing trip

