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157-JN-512 – Ernest Buchanan Parker

157-JN-3307 – Joe Daniel Hawkins

157-JN-5151 – Jewel Lee Burt, KKK

157-JN-7479 – James Lee Scarborough

157-JN-2179 – L.C. Murray, KKK

NO 157-1617 – Elden Glenn Hester

NO 157-4168 – James F. Lee, KKK

NO 157-4662 – Buck Horton, KKK

NO 157-6266 – Kenneth Norman Head

NO 157-7519 – Donald Holland

NO 157-7545 – Woodrow Holloway, KKK

NO 157-7589 – James H. Taylor

NO 157-7639 – Raymond Scott Wright

NO 157-7640 – James E. Blaney, KKK

NO 157-7737 – Earcel Boyd

157-HQ-2311 – Death of Frank Morris



# Concordia Sentinel

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*File  
Earl Hodges*

## Seales, Avants linked to 1965 murder of Earl Hodges in Franklin County

by Stanley Nelson - posted Thursday, June 10th, 2010 @ 8:14 am

Little noticed outside Franklin County, Miss., on August 15, 1965, was the savage murder of 47-year-old Earl Hodges of Eddiceton, a white man, who was attacked by about a half dozen Klansmen for allegedly informing on the Ku Klux Klan.

A McComb newspaper reported a few days after the fatal beating that Hodges had been inside his father's shotgun house minutes after the attack when he arose from his blood-soaked bed sometime around midnight. Leaving a bloody trail throughout the small house, he stumbled to the backyard where he attempted to draw water from a well to wash his multiple bleeding wounds, then collapsed and died.

The murder sent a clear message throughout the Klan community in both Mississippi and Louisiana -- inform on the KKK and you will suffer consequences. But the attack also hurt the Klan in Franklin County's white community, where a year earlier in 1964 two black Meadville teens -- Henry Hezekiah Dee and Charles Moore -- were kidnapped, beaten and murdered by Klansmen.

One Klansman implicated in both attacks -- James Ford Seale -- is now in federal prison following his conviction in 2007 for the 1964 murder of Dee and Moore. But Seale reportedly remains silent on his KKK past, while the Earl Hodges family still wonders why Hodges was killed and by whom.

"They never got any answers," said Anne Hodges, the widow of Frank Hodges, one of Earl Hodges' two sons. She said Frank, who died in 2004 at the age of 51, "suffered a lot of emotional trauma over this. He and his brother (Roy Earl) saw their Dad's body. Frank had no doubt his father was killed by the Klan."

But like so many families whose loved ones were murdered during the Civil Rights' era -- homicides that remain unsolved -- Anne said her husband was not once contacted by any law enforcement authority on any level -- local, state or federal -- with information on his father's murder.

The late Jim Ingram, a longtime FBI agent in Mississippi, told The Sentinel before his death in 2009 that the bureau looked at the Hodges' murder in 2007, but said he could not comment on the matter.

A grand jury convened in Franklin County on August 23, 1965, eight days after the Hodges' murder, but took no action. "The evidence apparently did not justify even an arrest," reported Charles B. Gordon in the McComb Enterprise-Journal in a late August 1965 article entitled, "Savage Killing of Franklin Countian Remains a Puzzle."

"Years after his Dad's death, Frank worked as a pressman at McComb Printing," Anne Hodges told The Sentinel. "He carried a clipping of the Enterprise-Journal story with him for years. That's all he ever knew."

The paper reported that 11 investigators initially looked at the case, including Sheriff Wayne Hutto, District Attorney Lenox Forman and FBI agents. After investigating the crime himself for two days, reporter Gordon wrote that many rumors were circulating.

Klansman Ernest Avants, a suspect in the Hodges' homicide who was convicted years later in federal court for the 1966 murder of Ben Chester White in Adams County, "displayed some interest in the murder" of Hodges during an interview by agents in 1967, according to FBI records. In that interview, Avants indicated that a woman was "involved." But the Enterprise-Journal reported after a two-day probe in Franklin County that the murder involved the Ku Klux Klan.

Born Jan. 13, 1918, in Lincoln County, Hodges married Neva Short in the Loyd Star community on Christmas Eve 1936. Hodges was a well-respected mechanic in Brookhaven when just a young man, and considered handsome and a good dancer admired on the dance floor at the Eola Hotel in Natchez.

After World War II, where he served in the Air Force in occupied Italy, he opened a service station in the Eddiceton community of Franklin County -- Hodges' Garage. He reportedly built a thriving business based on his skills as a mechanic, while wife Neva helped pump gas, kept the books and tended to their two sons, Roy Earl and Frank.

Neva told the Enterprise-Journal in 1965 that Hodges "had a splendid head for business." Also popular, he became a post commander of the American Legion in Meadville, a Shriner and an officer in the Masonic Lodge.

At some point during the 1950s, however, Hodges began drinking heavily, and ignored his business and the needs of his family. Gordon reported in the McComb paper that Hodges had also developed a pattern of carousing and philandering.

After a few years of turmoil, Neva, now dead, took the boys and moved to McComb. The couple divorced in 1961, and Hodges later closed the station.

At some point in his past, as the Civil Rights Movement pushed against the stonewall of Mississippi resistance, Hodges joined a White Knights of the Ku Klux Klan unit in Franklin County led by Clyde Seale, a farmer. Two of Clyde Seale's sons were in the Klan, too -- Jack Seale, who lived in Natchez -- and James Ford Seale, who lived in the Bunkley community of Franklin County and was a member of Clyde Seale's klavern.

In September 1965, one month after the Hodges' murder, Congressional investigator John D. Sullivan concluded that Clyde Seale and James Ford Seale were two "excellent suspects." Sullivan was working for the House UnAmerican Activities Committee that was investigating the Klan and would hold hearings in early 1966 in Washington, D.C., during which the Seales would be questioned about Hodges.

Sullivan reported to the committee that Hodges wanted out of Clyde Seale's Klan unit and that there was bad blood -- when Seale "tried to line up a Meadville businessman (white) for a beating because of alleged fraternization with his Negro cook...Hodges opposed him (Seale)."

Clyde Seale, who was 64 in 1965 and has since died, refused to answer a House committee investigator in 1966 who asked "did you ever have an argument with Earl Hodges?" He also refused to answer whether Hodges was a member of Seale's White Knights unit.

Another motive for the murder emerged in the 1970s when then-District Attorney Edward Benoist obtained a statement from Franklin County resident Warren Newman, a friend of Hodges, who provided an account of the fatal beating. In the statement, Newman said the Klan feared that Hodges was providing information on the Dee-Moore murders to his brother-in-law, Mississippi Highway Safety Patrol officer Dan Vernon, who was on a task force assigned to break up the Klan.

According to the statement, Newman, who said he was not at the scene the night of the beating, claimed that he and other friends of Hodges set up a meeting between Hodges and the Klan to clear the air. Of the nine or 10 men present that night, Newman said some were friends of Hodges and others were Klansmen, including, according to the statement, Clyde Seale and Ernest Avants. Newman told Benoist that an argument ensued and the meeting turned violent although it is unclear if Hodges' friends assisted him during the brawl.

Newman did not place James Ford Seale at the beating, according to the statement, but other informants did. Of the men linked to the beating, James Ford Seale is the only one still alive.

Benoist faced one major obstacle moving the case toward prosecution: Newman's account was hearsay. Additionally, the chances of convicting Klansmen in local courts was unlikely. In 1967 Benoist had brought Avants to trial in Adams County for the murder of Ben Chester White, but the local jury found him and others not guilty.

The Enterprise-Journal reported in 1965 that at 10 p.m., Saturday, August 14, 1965, Hodges visited friends Warren Newman and J.C. Emfinger near Bude. The paper reported that Hodges had been drinking and told the two men that his pickup was stuck in a ditch nearby and asked for help.

The men agreed to take Hodges home and to pull the truck out of the ditch the next day, but first asked him to join them for a late supper. An autopsy revealed Hodges had eaten steak, okra and peas about an hour before he was beaten and two hours before he died shortly after midnight on August 15, 1965.

The men reportedly drove Hodges to the home of his father, Zebb, in the Eddiceton community around 10:30 p.m. Zebb was away that night sitting with a sick friend, according to the Enterprise-Journal.

The next day, according to the newspaper, two neighbors, Bernie Watson and Bill Campbell, "discovered a pair of bloody torn trousers" along the tracks a hundred yards behind Zebb Hodges' house. They saw a spot or two of blood nearby, but as they walked to the house they saw no blood along the way. In the back yard, they discovered Hodges' "trouser-less" body.

The paper reported that it was uncertain where the beating took place -- along the railroad tracks, at Zebb Hodges' place or at an abandoned house nearby.

"There were apparently at least two instruments used in this beating," wrote investigator Sullivan for the House committee in September 1965 -- a three-to-four inch strap and a similar belt with tacks "that stuck out about 1/8 inch and this one tore the flesh every time he (Hodges) was struck with it." Sullivan wrote that straps were used in many of the previous nine Klan-administered beatings in Franklin County in 1965.

The Enterprise-Journal reported that testimony presented to the grand jury showed that Hodges' pants "were probably cut at the waist and ripped from his body," that his body was moved after death, and that "his skull was not fractured..."

Hodges' body was taken to a Natchez pathologist for an autopsy. Sullivan reported in 1965 that an "examination of his body showed welts from the bottom of his feet to the top of his head. There was a hole in the top of his head. There was a split from the left side of his nose to his left eye which was deep enough so you could see the roof of his mouth."

According to Hodges' death certificate, signed by Coroner J.W. Hollingsworth, Hodges died of a heart attack apparently triggered by the beating.

Sullivan learned from an informant that when FBI agents and Mississippi Highway Safety Patrol investigators left the courthouse a day after the murder, Sheriff Wayne Hutto exclaimed: "To hell with the FBI and the Highway Patrol investigation - the Klan will be here a long time after they are gone."

FBI records show that in 1968 two members of the Franklin County Board of Supervisors -- Frank Allen of Smithdale and Hilton M. Zumbro of Bude -- told agents that public outrage following Hodges' murder brought on the demise of the Klan. "It broke the backbone of the Klan," Allen said.

Yet unsolved murders hold the victims' families in a limbo of anguish few on the outside can understand.

"Two young boys' lives were changed" when their father was murdered, Anne Hodges said. "This haunted my husband all his life. I hope we can bury some ghosts and get the closure he always needed."

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