Journal of Dr. Janet Moses

Cambridge Rindge Latin School to McComb, Mississippi,
A Civil Rights Journey with the Kimbrough Scholars

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Northeastern University School of Law
Dr. Janet Moses’ Journal

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A Civil Rights Journey with the Kimbrough Scholar
April 9-11, 2014

Introduction

Dr. Janet Moses, a community activist, retired pediatrician, and former voting rights worker with the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee, accompanied the Kimbrough Scholars, a group of high school students from Cambridge Rindge Latin School, on their journey to McComb, Mississippi. Their mission was the investigation of a civil rights “cold case” involving the murder of Eugene Bell, an African American man. In addition to describing the interactions between the students and the people they encountered, her journal provides deep insight into the power of the experiential learning process.

The Kimbrough Scholars Program honors the vision and ideals of Les Kimbrough, a former CRLS teacher and administrator who "believed in the power of education to transform the lives of individuals and our society." Civil Rights history was part of the curriculum that he taught. In the spring of 2014 the first group of Kimbrough Scholars – four CRLS seniors and a junior -- participated in a collaboration between a CRLS-based Civil Rights history seminar and Northeastern University Law School’s Civil Rights and Restorative Justice Project (CRRJ). Law students involved in the CRRJ Project investigate and litigate racially motivated homicides from the 1930's through the 1960's. A major goal of the CRRJ Project is seeking to expose the use of violence and terror which keeps African Americans from exercising their rights as citizens. A second goal is to achieve restorative justice by finding ways to address the injustice and harms that were inflicted upon the victims, their families and their communities. Through their persistence in seeking the
truth and respectfully listening to the stories and feelings of community members and families affected by the crimes, CRRJ Project participants acknowledge and validate the experiences of people who have been forgotten and ignored. Meeting the families and members of the communities where the crimes occurred, the students gain a deep understanding of civil rights history and the importance of restorative justice and healing.

The CRLS students sought information about Eugene Bell’s murder, which occurred in Amite County, Mississippi in 1945. Before their journey to Mississippi, they spent many hours developing research skills and using them to uncover evidence in the NAACP archives housed at Harvard University. Simultaneously, they participated in a CRLS seminar in which they read and analyzed primary and secondary sources that led them to a deeper understanding of the social, cultural, and economic forces that provide an historic context for the murder of Eugene Bell.

Guided by Dr. Moses, Cambridge Rindge Latin School teacher Kathleen Fitzgerald, and CRRJ Fellow Attorney Bayliss Fiddiman, the students interviewed local activists and met with veterans of the Civil Rights Movement of the 1960’s, as well as with relatives of Eugene Bell. Upon their return, the students presented their findings and understandings to an audience of school faculty, students, and community leaders. Their work contributed significantly to the ongoing legal investigation of the Bell case by CRRJ.
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Day 1: Wednesday, April 9, 2014

We’ve had a great day. Our flight was smooth, although Charles’ nerves were a little frayed by the idea of being suspended in air. Nana helped explain the rudiments of aerodynamics. Madedot wrestled with the meaning of ‘paradigm’ and the idea of slavery being a paradigm for the abuse of unlimited power and control over others. (She’s reading a book of essays.) Katherine and Daniel busied themselves with small talk.

Bobby Talbert and the Reverend Benton “Ben” Thompson greeted us warmly. Bobby has nicknamed Maedot, ‘Little Bit.’ He’s got Katherine to slow her speech down: “This is how we say it in Mississippi,” he explains as he waves his hands as if leading the band into a slow blues. He regales the crew with clips from his life in the Movement, and declarations about the world as he sees it. Good discussion about minimum wage in Mississippi: “In fifty-nine years, the minimum wage has gone up from one dollar to $6.25,” Bobby exclaims, and repeats for emphasis.

Reverend Thompson is warm and professional. His story about how Mississippi has changed and how it has remained true to its confederate roots awaits us. We leave Louisiana on Highway 55 through mangrove swamps that boast alligator, crawfish, nutria, and scattered houses on stilts and slide into Pike Country.

The hotel is very comfortable, and the manager, Mrs. Kennedy, makes sure that the sleeping arrangements are to our liking. Bayliss Fiddiman, our lawyer-mentor from Northeastern University’s CRRJ project, is switched to a smaller room so that the girls can have a cot in their room. Kathleen Fitzgerald, Cambridge Rindge and Latin High School
teacher, has just returned from her Mary Poppins duty to report that the girls have
sandwiched the cot between the two double beds. The girls are three peas on one pod.

Dinner is at Ruby Tuesdays. The sweet iced tea is REALLY sweet. More talk:
affirmative action, no sidewalks, the absence of other Black students in their AP classes.
Reminders about the Brenda Travis interview, which are to be read tonight, in addition to
making entries in their journals. Nana has informed us that he is writing a book. He used
the ride up to McComb to take notes on Bobby's soliloquies.

They’re all tucked in. The bus leaves in the morning for a tour of McComb. Lisa Deer,
our mentor from the McComb Legacy Young People’s Project, and Bobby Talbart will be our
guides.

**Day One: Wednesday, April 9, 2014, continued** (written April 26, 2014)

I’m trying to keep my promise about documenting the trip. Keep in mind that I am
recounting what I remember. Our schedule includes a meeting with the YPP students
Thursday evening. On Friday, Day 3 we’ll visit the world of Rev. Thompson, the Amite
courthouse, meet Rev. White, and Cousin Ida. We’ll also interview Ray Ramsey, who
remembers the events surrounding the Bell murder, and was witness to the trauma
suffered by Hilton (Babe) Lee. Also on Day 3, we’re promised an opportunity to follow up
on the Rev. Isaac Simmons story.

**Day 2: Thursday, April 10, 2014**

Students meander into the hotel lobby for breakfast—eggs, bacon, sausage,
potatoes, toast and pastries, juice, fresh fruit, coffee, tea, yogurt served from 7 to 10. We
have planned for Reverend Thompson, Lisa Deer and Bobby Talbert to take us on the Civil
Rights Tour of McComb at 9. Bayliss is anxiously awaiting the arrival of her luggage, which was sent to New York City. It arrives, in the nick of time. Halleluia! We eat up and take a few items for snacks.

We wind our way through the hotel lobby which has become very crowded with men whose heads are bent over applications for employment at the hotel. The men are dressed in workmen’s clothing, no suits or ties, just the type of clothing they would wear if hired to fill the menial positions for which they now compete. Bobby Talbert’s lecture on the bus the day before rings in our ears: “Since 1965 -til now, ...in fifty-nine years the minimum wage in Mississippi has gone from one dollar an hour to six dollars an hour!”

Bobby’s sound bite assumes a poignant relevance and is a mini-introduction to Economics 100. The brown and black bodies, lining the walls of the hotel lobby and vying for jobs that do not guarantee food on the table or a roof overhead, coalesce into a montage of day laborers and sharecroppers in the twenty-first century.

We’re on the bus. First stop is C.C. Bryant’s. A plaque stands on the border of his house and his barber shop, which served as a node in the underground network of local Mississippians who had survived the pogroms of the 40’s and 50’s and were determined against all odds to nurture the next wave of troops who would take Mississippi by storm. The plaque contains a wonderful picture of Bob Moses and C.C. Bryant--the student and his teacher together. Lisa and Bobby provide meaning and historical context for the stop.

A car stops on the road alongside of our group. The driver gets out leaving the car door wide open. She introduces herself. “Patricia, Patricia Bevins.” She lives in the neighborhood. I ask, but she doesn’t claim any relations to Jessie Bevins, the teen warrior from Bear town. She was just wondering about our group. We explain. She’s warm, open,
radiant in her 60’s and her bright red sweater. She shares information about current neighborhood struggles to get city services. We offer information about Eugene Bell. She wonders whether she has heard about him and whether he had been a member of the NAACP or the Black Mississippi underground. We note the possibility, take pictures, and get back on the bus.

Next stop Burgland High, now Higgins High, and erasure on the blackboard of McComb student militancy: Higgins High is a modern, cleanly brick edifice named after the principal who refused to admit Brenda Travis into school in her senior year because of her participation in local demonstrations during the summer of 1961. The students recall Brenda’s twenty-three page interview assigned to them the night before. Bobby proudly recounts his participation in the Burgland walkout and subsequent incarceration along with one hundred eighteen other students, some of whom—now seniors in the Fall of their lives—we are to meet this evening. Lisa muses in her lyrical voice about the seeming contradictions of honoring Principal Higgins and not Brenda. Would Principal Higgins have been able to orchestrate the building of a new high school for the students of McComb had he not thrown Brenda under the bus? Lisa’s heart is with Brenda; her head rests in the gray area of complexity and compromise. She doesn’t answer her question. It’s a Socratic moment.

The bus rolls onto Ms. Ayleene Quin’s property. The house is boarded up and partially burned. The neighborhood is in disrepair. The story of the Matriarch of McComb, fearless in her support of freedom riders and SNCC voter registration workers, comes alive in Lisa’s retelling.
Next stop Nobles Cleaners, a faded burgundy, weather-worn stucco building. Lisa explains how local leaders held clandestine meetings among the racks of clothes in the shop. We don't get off the bus. We need to get to the McComb Courthouse.

Reverend Thompson, the architect of the McComb Economic Development Center, who has graciously agreed to serve as our drive/guide, gets off the bus and goes into the courthouse. In addition to his clerical portfolio, he wears the hat of a successful Black Mississippi businessman and community leader. His presence and clout enable us to get permission to view the jail cells where Bobby and the other one hundred and eighteen Burgland students were taken fifty-three years ago. The students enter the cramped cells, a little giddy at first. Then a quiet solemnity settle over them as Lisa recounts some of the details of the Burgland students’ experience in jail. I think of Bob Moses and Hollis Watkins, and several other SNCC workers who also inhabited those cells before being sent for a 39 day stint in the Pike County jail. When we get back to Boston, I will have to remember to get a copy of the letter that Bob wrote from the Pike Country Jail. Nana takes photos of signs alerting citizens to the minimum wage, $6.25 or $7.25 per hour and to the list of acceptable voter I.D. documents.

The Mayor emerges from the Courthouse for a photo op and gives each student a trinket. He smiles to hide his discomfort and seems somewhat surprised by Katherine’s forthright explanation of the purpose of our visit to McComb. A Cold Case! An unsolved murder in Mississippi! Old bones rising again!

I’m not sure whether it is Bobby Talbert or Reverend Thompson who connects the dots that lead us to Ms. Birdie Lee Walker. Now 96 years old, she stands supported by her walker on the elevator-platform that gently lifts her onto the Reverend Thompson’s air-
conditioned adult daycare van. She sits primly in a black hat and blue dress. Katherine is the interviewer. She speaks slowly, clearly, and listens to the faint voice that recalls the terror and bravery of that day fifty-three years ago.

Ms. Birdie Lee Walker and her sister, Ms. Scoby, were the first folk to go down to the courthouse with Bob Moses to register to vote in 1961. She recalls their ride to the courthouse, their walk up the courthouse stairs, the sheriff who stops their vehicle and summons Bob out of the car, and the words of reassurance that Bob gives them as he is arrested. “Don’t worry. They don’t want you; they want me.”

Ms. Birdie Lee does not recall news of Eugene Bell. She does recall her ride to the courthouse and repeats the incident, which is an indelible groove in her fading memory. She is a reminder of the courage of ordinary folk who accomplished extraordinary feats, and the urgency of our task of capturing what they know before they leave this earth.

We break for lunch and then go to the McComb Library where we are to meet Ms. Reva Nunnery and Craig Nunnery—Eugene Bell’s daughter and grandson. Each student has a question for Ms. Nunnery and Craig. They have had a session on interviewing skills at Northeastern, but their questions are broad, unable to penetrate the veil of innocence and unknowing that Ms. Reva wears. ”Nice” is her frequent response.

Neither Craig nor his mother has heard of Wiley Smith, the Amite County sheriff, noted in the 1946 news article from the Pittsburgh Courier. Craig makes sure that Maedot has spelled his name correctly, “Crayeeg, not Greyeeg,” and commands us to find information about Andy Jones, a former sheriff of Amite who rained terror down over the Black Community and who later, as the story goes, was struck by some unnamed affliction which forced him to ambulate on his knees, and beg forgiveness from all those Black folk
whom he had abused and offended. Craig gets up from the table and quickly returns with a picture of his Grandfather, Eugene Bell, standing alert in his WWII army uniform. We learn that there may be more knowledgeable relatives in Wisconsin, and perhaps a few in Amite, the neighboring county. The students make note of the lead.

Bayliss presents the Nunnerys with the packet of information about Eugene Bell and the Civil Rights and Restorative Justice Project. As part of her presentation, Bayliss shares with them the information that Bo Bells, Ms. Nunnery’s grandfather, also had been lynched. This news breaks Ms. Nunnery’s gentle stoicism. She cries soft tears amid muffled sniffles. Each of us is deeply touched. We thank them for their gift of sharing, and move to the Genealogy and Local History section of the library.

I explain to the students that Craig Nunnery has given us our marching orders. We have never heard of Andy Jones, but our credibility with Craig requires that we check out Andy Jones. The students divide themselves into two groups. Maedot and Charles quickly attack the microfiche file. Their eyes are cameras taking snapshots of the photos and articles on the screen. No left-to-right-line-by-line reading; information is gulped down pac-man style. They soon extract information about the sheriff of Pike County who had been newly appointed at the time of Eugene’s murder. Maedot prints the article out only to be reminded that Mr. Bells was killed in neighboring Amite Country. We postulate that this new sheriff had to know about the Bell case, and so Maedot is advised to hold onto this sliver of what may turn out not to be tangential information.

Danielle cannot find Andy Jones, but there is a Sheriff Daniel Jones whose history is preserved in the archives of the Genealogy Room of the library. Danielle moves quickly
between the Genealogy Room and the library printer, making copies of articles about Sheriff Daniel Jones.

Danielle, Katherine and Nana scavenge through a few boxes of death certificates, and local literary memorabilia. They find a book heralding the confederate way of life as lived in Amite Country. Kathleen takes photos of salient pictures and text passages, one of which remarks that in 1890 the county had public schools which became the foundations of the Amite school system. These schools had to have been created during Reconstruction—a fact not mentioned in this narrative of a white, unblemished southern way of life.

Nana and Danielle uncover a volume listing the sheriffs and county supervisors in the 1940's and 1950's. Among the names and dates, neatly boxed into precise and symmetric columns on pages that will eventually burn in the cauldron of time, is that of Earl Moore – an eerily familiar name, a name called out in our reading and re-reading of the *Pittsburgh Courier* article about Eugene Bell's death:

“Three white men whose names were given by Hilton Lea as Oball Mundry, Earl Moore and Little Wiley Banns, came to the truck.”

Could the Earl Moore on the list of county supervisors be the same Earl Moore who went to the truck? According to Hilton Lee, Moore:

“...threw the gun upon my wife and children; made them get out of the truck and ran them...and then struck me on the head with his gun, whereupon I held the gun and he said, ‘Shoot him, kill him!’”

Nana looks at the list carefully. Earl Moore was the Amite County Supervisor for Amite for eight years, from 1944 to 1952. He wonders aloud in his soft, yet penetrating voice, whether it is significant that for each term of service, Moore is the fourth and only
recurring name on the list. We now know that Earl Moore was Country Supervisor at the same time that Sheriff Wiley was a law enforcement officer in Amite County. We need to find out the power invested in the office of country supervisor. Governance is relevant. Nana will research the duties of the County Supervisor. Danielle and Nana find no trace of Oball Mundry or Little Wiley Banns, but they now know that it is highly probable that Earl Moore, a country official, was part of the lynch mob and that Sheriff Wiley was an accomplice!

It’s almost 5:00 pm, or three minutes before ten minutes to five, which is Nana’s way of reminding us that it’s time to get on the bus and go to the Black History Gallery where the Young People’s Project students are waiting to host us.

**Day 2: April 10, 2014, continued** (Written May 6, 2014)

Lisa Deer has arranged for our group to meet with members of the Young People’s Project (YPP) of McComb. YPP is a national organization founded by young people to develop and deploy math literacy workers in several projects across the country. Lisa explains that the McComb youth concentrate their efforts on learning and disseminating throughout the community, the civil rights history of McComb. They have scoured the records of the Mississippi State Sovereignty Commission, looking for names, dates and events which shed light on the brutality and violence waged against the Black community and the collective insanity of the white community, which created and condoned the violence. Their commitment to their mission of educating and raising the consciousness of their community has pitted them against a school administration and the guidelines underlying the funding from the National History Project, which require that the students’ project be confined to the school.
The school sugarcoats its demand that the students not involve the community in their work with offers of meeting space and continued funding. A core group of the YPP students refuses to relent. They understand that the community is their umbilical cord. The school and the money source stand their ground. No shelter and no food; it’s their way or the highway! The YPP students hit the road. They passed their first test in non-violent resistance!

And so we meet the YPP students and veterans of the Movement in their new home at the Galaxy History Museum, a rambling clapboard structure raised from the ashes of the crack epidemic by Ms. Casin, a retired school teacher. She has painstakingly collected memorabilia of Africa, of African-Americana, of the Civil Rights Movement in McComb and beyond, for her community. The rooms are packed with items of consequence, each one neatly displayed and waiting to be touched. Nothing is under glass—a stipulation that some interested funders required, but which Ms. Casin would not abide. Her collectibles are to be imbibed, caressed, and used to infiltrate the minds of a people who have had to grope their way through the fog of assumed inferiority. And her refusal has cost the museum potential sponsors and funders for whom Ms. Casin’s collection is mere eye candy, not forklifts in the resurrection of a community.

Ms. Casin is medium height. Her dress drapes neatly over her spare, erect frame. She moves quietly through the museum, welcoming us. Reverend Thompson reveals that Ms Casin was one of his teachers, and that he is forever grateful that she had not spared the rod in retaliation for his mischief making. He recounts her mantra: “You don’t have to be an A student, but we’re not having any C students.” The bar had been set high. Ms. Casin, whose entire professional life was cloistered in racially segregated classrooms, is a
counter-narrative to implicit assumptions in the *Brown* decision about the capacity of Black children to excel in all-Black settings. Now that Black students comprise nearly all of the children in Mississippi public schools and white students are barricaded in Christian academies, the questions of integration is moot.

With us in the circle are veterans of the McComb movement: Shirley Bates, who was thirteen years old when she walked herself out of Burgland High and into the McComb jail; Joe Lewis whose portraits of African Americans deck the walls of the museum; and Ms. Nelson, who shyly shares with us her small part in the Burgland rebellion. The elders understand the power of youth to create change. Sharing their stories is a way of passing the torch. One never knows who will pick it up—Nana, Charles, Maedot, Katherine, Danielle? All of them? Some of them? None of them?

The McComb YPPers have created a powerful reenactment of the McComb walk-out. Their video won second prize in a National History Project competition. The students share bits of themselves. Nana has decided that he feels more at home in Mississippi than in Massachusetts. Why? It’s the warmth of the people, the demonstration of community and interconnectedness, the stuff that binds and nurtures the best within each of us that Nana had discovered. It is the ‘stuff’ that made the Movement of the 60’s possible. Nana, our engineer, has uncovered the cornerstone of resistance and rebellion.

There is a little time left in the evening for the students to just hang. Charles breaks out in an edited version of a dance move, but before a party can get off the ground, we’re back on the bus and headed toward the hotel.
Day 3: Friday, April 11, 2014

We begin the day with our usual march into the hotel lobby for breakfast. Gone are the job seekers who lined the walls of the lobby the day before. They have faded into the woodwork of their lives—potential energy, treading water in the Mississippi estuaries of the global economy.

We’ve promised Reverend Thompson to visit the Mt. Zion Adult Day Care Center, his stake in the future of the state. The center is the cornerstone of his network which includes acres of timberland, a transportation service that brings otherwise house-bound seniors to the day care center, and a herd of cows guarded by several stallions. He gives us a tour. The church that he pastors is part of the property. The students compete against each other making baskets in the large gymnasium that is part of the Mt. Zion Complex.

We are back on the bus, hound dogs on the trail of Eugene Bell, sniffing for clues. I think about E.W. Steptoe now departed, who risked his life organizing the NAACP in Amite County in the 1950’s and 1960’s. It was under the shadow of Steptoe’s protective arm that Bob Moses, unannounced, found solace and safety at any hour of the day or night. Herbert Lee, Steptoe’s neighbor, an inductee in the battle to raise the Fourteenth Amendment from the dead, risked his life too, and lost, as did Louis Allen, who three years later dared to announce his truth: "It was E.H. Hurst, Mississippi Congressman Hurst, Herbert Lee’s neighbor who killed Herbert.” Dry bones, rattling, rattling in my mind. Did the Steptoe children inherit the stories of resistance and resilience, and mayhem and murder along with the land that their parents bequeathed them? We are foraging for Steptoes!

Our second stop is the Amite Country Courthouse. Reverend Thompson goes into the Courthouse and emerges with the Assistant to the Chief Clerk of the Court. Her face is
deep milk chocolate, unwrinkled under the salt and pepper gray of her hair. We ask about
the Steptoes. Might they know something about Eugene Bell? Gladys, his daughter – away
in Louisiana; Roosevelt, aging and ailing in California. She tells us and provides the phone
numbers of other Steptoes who live in the county. In Amite, we are each others keepers.

In the Courthouse, Bayliss, seasoned in the etiquette of lawyering, deploys the
students to the Probate and Criminal sections. She probes, but finds no trace of Mundy or
O’Ball, the two other alleged perpetrators, and surmises that they may have been recruits
from Louisiana, or one of the neighboring counties. Among the many calligraphic entries in
the court records, there is no record of Eugene Bell’s murder. The wheels of Mississippi
justice rolled over him in an Amite County ditch. No need for the pretense of a trial, or to
stir up some ole mess.

The students are sleuths in the dissection of the documents. They find Earl Moore,
the County Supervisor, implicated in the murder of Eugene Bell and resurrected in the
courthouse documentation of multiple land grabs: ¼ acre here, ½ acre there--bits and
pieces of acreage, building white Earl Moore’s wealth.

Ronny Taylor, Chief Clerk of the Court, enters one of the record rooms to give us a
proper Mississippi welcome. He regales the students with a few preacher-like jokes to
break the ice and dispel any thought that the Amite Country records might be tainted by a
need for posterity not to know the full details of its blood-soaked history. He asks if I’m
related to Bob Moses. He knows the answer, but asks anyway, as if the question is a
spontaneous thought. I answer in the affirmative and do not ask him the ‘why’ of his asking,
and the ‘how’ of his knowing. Mine is a feigned innocence. It’s a Mississippi thing, the art of
deciphering the silence, the empty spaces pregnant with the Truth that is inadmissible in any court of law.

He invites me into his office and carefully extracts two picture frames out from behind his file cabinet. He explains that he removed them from the walls of the courthouse out of a concern that some observers would find them offensive – that their meaning would be lost in translation between white folks’ guilt and Black folks’ shame. “I would like to believe that all white folk were not bad,” he says haltingly, handing me the frames that lay cradled in his hands. They are proof of his atonement and of his need to believe that the sickness of hate, mayhem and murder had spared some white folk, him included.

I look at his offering: an advertisement for the estate sale of ten Negro slaves, one of whom is a mother with her infant, and the corresponding bill of sale, which lists the names and asking price for each African. It is clear that the value of the estate is based upon the number of African slaves being sold. Furniture and other items are sold for a pittance.

‘Yes,’ we can take pictures of these documents, and ‘No,’ he had never heard of Douglass Blackmon, a white Mississippi historian. Blackmon wrote powerfully about peonage, the industrial, post-Civil War, post-Reconstruction slavery that was finally outlawed by President Franklin Delano Roosevelt on December 12, 1941, one week after Pearl Harbor and nine weeks before I was born! We pull up Blackmon and his book, Slavery By Another Name: the Re-enslavement of Black Americans from the Civil War to World War II, on Ronny Taylor’s office computer. He will get the book, prick a hole in the innocence of his unknowing.

We return to the record room where he presents the documents to our students and, through attempts to hold back his tears, explains, “Many white folk didn't take a stand
against the sickness because, just as Ms. Moses said, they were intimidated by the Klan.”

(His guilt takes shelter under the canopy of white victimhood.)

We examine the documents. Questions arise. Nine of the ten names are Anglo names devoid of the languages that would have planted them in the space-time of their ancestors. African names were not given lightly, nor were they discarded willingly. ‘Victoria’ – no last name needed, is a commodity, named only in the collective as ‘negro’ or ‘negress.’ Her ears would have been deaf to the language of her forebears, her eyes blind to the symbols etched into ebony cheeks that would have allowed her to recognize kin.

Ronny Taylor takes us deeper into the abyss of unknowing. ‘What is important to understand is that it is the bill of sale archived in courthouse records that documents the existence of Africans in America. For those who were never sold, who lived and died on the plantation of their birth, there is no official documentation of their existence.” He remarks about the many Black folk who come to the courthouse looking to retrace their roots only to discover the dead end of the unknowable.

Ronny Taylor is surprised by the sparse attendance at the courthouse. Many more white folk come to the courthouse looking for records of orphaned land, abandoned by taxpayers, or land that old folk are holding onto in hope that some of those who ran to the safety of the north might return to the earth that now bleeds thick black oil, three billion barrels of it under the fields that once grew cotton. He shows us a map and the ‘sweet spot’ that harbors the oil fields that stretch from Texas, parts of Louisiana, and into Amite and its sister southwest Mississippi counties. Black folk, pressed to make ends meet, accept the low-ball offers of oil barons and sell the mineral rights to the black gold that is locked in the rock underneath their land..
Katherine deftly snaps pages out of their oversized binders. She moves quickly. The copy machine is compliant with her punched instructions. Pages, yellow at their edges, are reinserted without fanfare. It’s almost two. We have worked through lunch. In our efforts to understand the why and how of Eugene Bell’s murder, we have tiptoed into the life of one of the alleged perpetrators and fallen onto a scheme to deprive Black Mississippians of wealth that should be theirs. The collateral of slavery is the collateral damage of the twenty-first century, labor that is no longer needed. I think of the Black men who, only the day before, lined the walls of the hotel looking for menial work in the oil-rich land of their forefathers.

Onto the bus, and off to the Herbert Lee Memorial at the Cotton Gin Restaurant to meet Reverend White, the local NAACP leader. It was here that white E.H. Hurst, the Mississippi legislator, delivered a bullet into the body of his neighbor and childhood playmate Herbert Lee. Lee had dared to tell his Black neighbors that Black people could vote one hundred years after the passage of the Fifteenth Amendment.

Reverend White joins us. He speaks slowly. He is deferential in tone, and adept in talking in generalities about the Black struggle for freedom. Reverend Thompson shares his story of working through the Mississippi briar patch. Reverend White demurs, and then, like a magician pulling a rabbit out of a hat, offers up a connection to the Crown Jewels of our quest. He makes a telephone call to Ida Mae Williams, cousin to Eugene Bell. Yes, we can come.

Cousin Ida is on the sunny side of 90. She lives on a grassy knoll that has sustained her kin for generations. She points to the rambling structure about 100 yards to the left of her knoll, and recounts the tale of her grandfather, who barricaded himself in that house
and fought off night riders. She freely tells what has been passed down to her about Eugene Bell and suggests that we speak with Ray Ramsey, Eugene Bell’s niece, who was a teen-ager in 1945 when Eugene Bell was murdered. She casually mentions that Eugene had a heart condition—perhaps the reason he was discharged from the army after only having served three months.

Cousin Ida tells the students that she loves them. She is taken by the sincerity of their effort to resurrect the life of one of her fallen relatives. The students and their work in Mississippi matter to her. Reverend White makes another call, this time to Ray Ramsey. Her son says, “Yes, we can come.”

We stop by the Swerington cemetery on the way to Ray Ramsey's home. It is here that Seab Bell and possibly Eugene are buried. According to the Pittsburgh Courier article that launched our investigation, it was Seab who was in the truck that fateful night in 1945 when O’Ball, Mundrey and Moore pulled Eugene Bell out of the cab of his truck and shot him.

The cemetery is a small patchwork quilt splayed on the floor of the pine forest that surrounds it. Concrete slabs mark Seab’s remains and those of other family members. There is no marker for Eugene. And if there were one, what would be inscribed? Certainly not that he had been murdered! “Here lies Eugene Bell, beloved brother, who died an unnatural death,” or “Here lies Eugene Bell, beloved brother and son born in 1923,” with no mention of his having died? In the muck of Amite County, Blacks don't die, they just fade away beyond the bounds of memory, until there are none to attest that they were ever born.
Reverend White leads us to Ray Ramsey’s home several Mississippi miles down the road from the cemetery. A small garden, each plant and artifact placed with intention, nothing haphazard, stands a few yards from the entrance to her home. A few horses graze lazily beyond the yard. Her son brings chairs. We wedge ourselves into her modest living room. Ms. Ray sits in a reclining chair at the center of our semicircle. She is our queen. Bayliss opens the meeting. Ms. Ray tells her story: the darkest days of her life occurred when she lost her teen grandson, the child who was never too busy to see about her. He was hit by a truck, as he inched the car out of the driveway of his home. Her sorrow wound its way into a bottomless pit, but when she thought she would lose herself in an avalanche of grief, he came to her in all of his angelic beauty. ‘You may not believe this, but it wasn’t a dream,’ she recalls. She had an artist paint a picture of her grandson with his wings and white robe. She instructs her son to bring the picture out of the bedroom for us to see.

Bayliss guides the conversation to Eugene Bell. We learn that Hilton Lea [Lee], of the *Pittsburgh Courier* newspaper article, was known as ‘Babe’ to his family. Ray Ramsey, slowly and in painstaking detail, recounts what she remembers of Babe, of how he was left for dead on that terrible night when Eugene was killed, and how a doctor came to the house and said there was nothing he could do for Babe except give him a shot, and how the women dressed the wounds of his shattered shoulder and bludgeoned head, and how they prayed and prayed and prayed until they could make a way to get him to Charity Hospital in New Orleans, where he stayed four months before being discharged into the arms of his loved ones.

Ms. Ramsey recalls trips to Swerlington Cemetery to tidy up the graves of their deceased, trips on foot that require a dexterity that her 86 year old body has forbidden for
many years. She thinks that Eugene is there in an unmarked, sunken grave, perhaps near Seab’s grave, which is clearly marked. She recounts the details of that harrowing night 69 years ago. Her memory is crisp, clear. Her words are unembellished. She corroborates the details in the *Pittsburgh Courier* article. She describes her uncle’s heart disease: “He’d get dark and sometimes it would take days for him to lighten, and he had a murmur.” Her description of his symptoms suggests congenital, cyanotic heart disease, diagnosable with a stethoscope, and an unequivocal criterion for army rejection—unless is the one who being enlisted is cannon fodder! Like Cousin Ida, Ray Ramsey doesn’t understand why the army ever inducted Eugene. Theirs is a rhetorical question. The answer sits deeply and painfully in their hearts.

Saturday morning we get a call from Professor Burnham, and agree to visit Hazel and Greg Adams, the granddaughter and great-grandson of Reverend Isaac Simmons, whose story is well documented on the CRRJ website. Mrs. Adams shares the harrowing story of the murder of her grandfather, Rev. Isaac Simmons. She was visiting Grandpa when he was pulled out of his house and beaten and murdered. He had been audacious enough to refuse to sell his three hundred acres of oil right land to white folk who know that a black man had no rights that a white man need respect. And so they murdered Reverend Isaac. His granddaughter Hazel Adams, having been robbed of her birthright, now lives in a low-income housing project in McComb. Other members of the Adams clan, propelled by the knowledge of their patriarch’s murder, and having decided that their lives were more important than the land, fled North as part of the Great Migration that furloughed six-plus million African-Americans out of the Jim Crow South, into the Jim Crow North.
We leave the Adams family and drive through the dusty, boarded-up town of Liberty. It’s Saturday morning; the streets are empty, silent. The air is still. As we leave town, Reverend Thompson points out the dark and vacant storefront, which was once the only grocery store in town. The town shrivels around the Pandora’s box of its violent past. Its future is gambled on the extraction of black oil from the shale that entombs those dry bones.

We’re headed for New Orleans, via dinner along the swamps of Louisiana Bayou Cajun country. We already miss Reverend Thompson and Bobby Talbert, when they deposit us at our hotel, where we sleep for a few hours before catching a terribly early flight back to Boston on Sunday morning.