

# ' SON OF THE ROUGH SOUTH

*An Uncivil Memoir*

KARL FLEMING  
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2005

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*Book design by Mark McGarry*  
*Set in Sabon*

Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data

Fleming, Karl

Son of the rough South: an uncivil memoir / Karl Fleming.—1st ed.

p. cm.

ISBN 1-58648-296-3

1. Fleming, Karl. 2. Civil rights workers—United States—Biography.

3. Journalists—United States—Biography. 4. African Americans—Civil rights—History—20th century. 5. Civil rights movements—United States—History—20th century. 6. Civil rights movements—Southern States—History—20th century.

7. United States—Race relations. 8. Southern States—Race relations.

9. African Americans—Civil rights—Southern States—History—20th century—Press coverage. 10. Southern States—Race relations—Press coverage.

I. Title.

E185.98.F55A3 2005

070'.92—dc22

[B]

2005043158

FIRST EDITION

10 9 8 7 6 5 4 3 2 1

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## *Chapter 9*

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# A Brave or Crazy Man

**T**HE FIRST TIME I saw James Meredith, on September 20, 1962, I thought, “This guy must be crazy.” He was standing, flanked by two officials of the U.S. government, in the registrar’s office of the University of Mississippi, trying to become the first Negro in history to attend school there. Meredith was five feet, six inches tall, weighed 130 pounds, and had long girlish eyelashes, setting off doe-like eyes, and a delicate little ebony face. He was meticulously dressed in a brown suit, white shirt, and red tie and carried a brown leather briefcase. He was as still as a stone, even though the governor of Mississippi himself, backed by armed men, was there to deny him enrollment.

Meredith had decided, all on his own, without the backing of any organization or court order, to become the first Negro to get into Ole Miss, the most prideful, powerful, and stubbornly

defended remaining bastion of segregation in the United States. So he was either very crazy—or very brave. Reason came down on the former probability, because the first Negro to try to get into Ole Miss two years earlier was immediately clapped into the state insane asylum and then run out of the state, and the second, who tried to get into Mississippi State, was sent to Parchman State Penitentiary for seven years on a trumped-up charge of “receiving stolen goods:” five sacks of chicken feed valued at less than twenty-five dollars.

Meredith was a married twenty-nine-year-old Air Force veteran with a three-year-old son. He was the seventh of fourteen children of a proud farmer who had saved enough money as a tenant to buy an eighty-four-acre farm near the small town of Kosciusko, Mississippi—the first Negro in history to own a farm in Attala County. Meredith’s mother worked in the local Negro school cafeteria. His parents were proud enough to believe that the lowest thing a Negro woman could do was work in a white woman’s kitchen and take care of her children. “Death is preferred to indignity,” Cap Meredith told his children. As a boy, Meredith walked four miles to school every day and watched the school bus come by driving white children to their segregated school. By the time he was out of high school, Meredith had decided, he later told me, that he had a “divine mission” to crack the system of “white supremacy” so that other Negroes would be emboldened to follow. He very early believed that he was possessed of “superhuman powers.” He said he joined the Air Force to further his education and to save money for this mission. After nine years, including service in Japan, he left the Air Force and entered the Jackson State College for Negroes.

He had already decided it was his constitutional right to go to Ole Miss, and the day after JFK was inaugurated as president, January 20, 1961, Meredith wrote to the Ole Miss registrar ask-

ing for an application. The registrar sent him the blank form with a letter saying, "We are very pleased to know of your interest in becoming a member of our student body."

Meredith filled this out and returned it, asking to be registered for the upcoming February semester, along with a ten-dollar room deposit, and now saying in a cover letter that "I am an American—Mississippi—Negro citizen." Four days later he got a telegram from the registrar saying that "for your information and guidance it has been found necessary to discontinue consideration of all applications for admission or registration for the second semester which were received after Jan. 15. We must advise you not to appear for registration."

Meredith then went to see Medgar Evers, head of the Mississippi NAACP, who referred him to Constance Baker Motley, the lawyer who headed the NAACP's Legal Defense and Education Fund in New York. She filed suit in federal court demanding Meredith's admission. Thus began a long dance by Mississippi to delay, avoid, confuse, or defeat federal law suits filed by the NAACP on Meredith's behalf.

On June 25, 1962, in New Orleans, the Fifth Circuit Court of Appeals ordered Meredith admitted, and on September 3—after another round of feints and delays on the part of Governor Ross Barnett and the Mississippi legislature—the judges declared Barnett and the trustees in contempt of court. On September 13 Barnett, citing the Tenth Amendment's provision that "powers not specifically delegated to the Federal government are reserved to the several states," declared he was "interposing" himself between Mississippi and the federal government, because of "this unwarranted, illegal and arbitrary usurpation of power."

He then made a statewide radio and television address and declared that the Meredith threat "is our greatest crisis since the War Between the States." He vowed that "no school in Missis-

sippi will be integrated while I am your governor.” He threatened to close all state schools, including Ole Miss, rather than give in to federal authority, and he called on all state officials to go to jail rather than submit. “If there be any official who is not prepared to suffer imprisonment for this righteous cause, I ask him now to submit his resignation. . . . The day of expediency has past. We must either submit to the unlawful dictates of the Federal Government or stand up like men and tell them ‘Never!’”

Barnett was a tall, ponderous Uriah Heep figure with sagging shoulders and parchment-pale skin. He was thin-lipped with a large sharp nose, thick graying eyebrows, and oiled gray hair. He invariably dressed in a funereal black suit, white shirt, and black tie. A former personal injury lawyer, he had been elected two years earlier by painting the sitting governor, James P. Coleman, as the worst thing you could call a Mississippi politician in this over-heated racial atmosphere—a moderate.

Among knowing journalists, Barnett had a reputation for being somewhat of a buffoon. He once addressed a lunch of B’nai B’rith members in Jackson as “you fine Christian gentleman,” and he had walked into the spinning propeller of his campaign plane and injured a shoulder. During the Kennedy–Nixon presidential debates in 1960 there was a headline-making exchange about what the U.S. posture should be over China threatening the islands of Matsui and Quemoy to intimidate Taiwan. Barnett’s PR man thought the governor should weigh in.

“What do you think we should do about Matsui and Quemoy?” he asked Barnett.

“I guess we can find a place for them over in the Fish and Game Commission,” the governor said.

His clownish reputation aside, Barnett was a venomous and dedicated segregationist. He once said that “God made niggers black because they are so mean and evil.”

In 1954, following the Supreme Court's *Brown v. Board of Education* ruling that separate schools were not equal, Mississippi was the birthplace of the White Citizens Council, whose purpose was to "promote the advantages of segregation and the dangers of integration." A kind of middle-class KKK, the Citizens Council quickly grew to 250 chapters across the South and 60,000 dues-paying members. Barnett was a dedicated member, and his chief adviser on matters racial was the man who founded the Citizens Council, William J. (Mustache Bill) Simmons of Greenwood, Mississippi.

In mid-September, Barnett pressured Ole Miss's trustees, who were beginning to waver under the federal judiciary's threat of contempt fines and possible jail for not registering Meredith, into ceding their authority and appointing him special registrar. He told a cheering state legislature on September 17 that "I'm going to keep the faith in order that we may preserve the great Christian ideals and principles that our forefathers handed down to us."

It was clear that white Mississippi's resistance—and the resistance of other Southern states—was not about the classroom. It was about the bedroom. And its obsession about "racial purity" was not that at all. It was, I had come to believe, the white Southern male's profound fear of the black man's alleged animal-like sexual potency. All through the white Southern male culture, dating to my own childhood and well back surely, were strewn jokes about the size of the Negro penis—and his insatiable sexual appetite. I had heard dozens of these jokes—and to my later chagrin, had told them myself.

The walls of school segregation had by now been breached in every other Southern state where Negroes had applied. Transportation services, lunch counters, and hotels had been integrated in many places, pursuant to new federal laws, but Mississippi had not budged one inch. When the Freedom Riders arrived in Jack-



son, after being beaten in Alabama and then promised protection in Mississippi, they were promptly jailed. When a group of black students from Jackson State and the private Tougaloo College attempted to sit in at Jackson five-and-dime stores in 1960, they were beaten, showered with catsup while cops looked on—and then arrested and jailed.

Mississippi was last in everything else—per capita income, education, economic growth, life expectancy, infant mortality, and poverty—but it was first in the lynching, beating, burning, bombing, and jailing of the rare impudent Negro who dared to challenge the system. It was also first in organized, state-funded opposition to integration.

Many blacks who could get out did so by taking the train from Memphis to the North, Chicago particularly, was the way out for thousands of Negroes seeking better work and more rights. And Memphis was the way in, too, for those returning or coming to the brutal segregated life of Mississippi. Negroes had a joke about it: When a Chicago Negro minister got the call to go preach in Mississippi he fell to his knees and asked God if he would go with him.

“Well, I’ll go as far as Memphis,” God said.

Soon after the *Brown v. Board of Education* ruling, the state of Mississippi formed and funded a “Sovereignty Commission” to spy on civil right organizations, intimidate white integration sympathizers (if any could be found), and to work with sheriffs and cops to collect and spread information on “outside agitators” and Mississippi Negroes who joined the NAACP or otherwise strayed beyond their assigned roles. Whatever was required would be done to protect “our Southern way of life.”

No place represented the romanticized, glorious white history of Mississippi, its misty-eyed nostalgia and defiant pride, like its beloved Ole Miss. Not for nothing were Ole Miss’s sports teams

nicknamed "Rebels." Thus the whole force and weight of Mississippi, its real power as well as its stubborn pride, were arrayed to prevent Meredith from fulfilling his "divine mission." That included Mississippi's press. Mississippi had a half-dozen small newspapers that tried to behave responsibly, calling on the state in editorials to follow the rule of law in the Meredith case. Their editors were threatened. Their advertisers deserted them and circulation plummeted. At the height of the fever, Hodding Carter III, editor of the *Greenville Delta Democrat*, and his father and brother barricaded themselves in their house with guns. Carter had merely written an editorial calling for law and order. But most of Mississippi's newspapers were blatantly racist, the worst being the virulent *Jackson Clarion-Ledger*, which ran a regular racist cartoon on its front page.

Now, here to challenge all of it and all of them, on a crisp fall afternoon in Oxford, home of the recently buried William Faulkner, stood the tiny, almost effete-looking James Meredith, about as unlikely a candidate for this seeming suicide mission as could be imagined. Alone at first in his quixotic quest, he now had a powerfully ally, the United States government, whose will would be expressed through the Fifth Circuit Court of Appeals in New Orleans and through three improbable figures: the attorney general, Bobby Kennedy; the head of his civil rights division, a slight, pale, and soft-spoken man named Burke Marshall; and Marshall's chief deputy, a blue-eyed, square-jawed, six-foot, two-inch Irish Republican from Wisconsin, John Doar.

On that day, Meredith was flanked on one side by the lanky and laconic Doar and on the other by John J. P. McShane, a ruddy-faced Irishman from New York who was chief deputy U.S. marshal. They had accompanied Meredith to Oxford on a Cessna 220 from New Orleans, where the Fifth Circuit had made its final ruling, and were armed with the court order mandating his

admission. I stood behind him with Claude Sitton, a guy from AP, and several reporters from Mississippi newspapers.

I had walked across the Illinois Central Railroad overpass leading onto the campus and through what was called the Grove, a 500-yard long oval of oaks and elms at the entrance of which was a huge statue of a Confederate soldier. The oval was ringed by old brick classroom buildings and at its head was the Lyceum (locally pronounced Li-SEE-um), the white-columned pink brick administration building put up when Ole Miss was started 114 years earlier. A large crowd of students had been waiting since mid-morning. Some of them tried to pull down the American flag from the pole in front of the Lyceum before student leaders stopped them. At 4 P.M. seventy-five State Highway patrolmen with pistols on their sides arrived in a motorcade and cleared a path in the crowd, and at 4:30 Meredith rolled onto the campus in a green-and-white Plymouth, tailed by another carload of marshals. The crowd booed loudly, and several students yelled, "Go home, nigger."

As we entered the Center for Continuation Studies Building through a rear door, there awaited Barnett, seated in a chair, a grim-faced retinue of aides and Highway Patrolman behind him. He then read a proclamation saying, "You, James H. Meredith, are hereby refused admission as a student at the University of Mississippi." As he spoke, he looked not at Meredith but at Doar and McShane. Nothing more was said and the men left, knowing—as Barnett himself knew—that they would be back. As Burke Marshall had made plainly clear before the Fifth Circuit, "There is no question that the order of this court is going to be carried out. There is no question but that the executive branch of the government will use whatever force—physical force if that is required—to enforce the order of the court. Mr. Meredith not only had the right to go in and be registered but he also has the right to remain there as a student."

The day after Meredith's first attempt, the *Meridian Star* editorialized, "Integrationists, according to their own statements, will never be satisfied with token integration. Massive integration will mean future intermarriage. Intermarriage in the South, where we are so evenly divided white and colored, means the end of both races, and the emergence of a tribe of mongrels."

Meredith's second stand took place not in Oxford, but in Jackson on September 25, where he—again with Doar and McShane at his side—decided to try to register directly with the thirteen-man university board of trustees in their office in the gray marble E. J. Woolfolk State Office Building across from the capitol. Word had gotten out that Meredith was coming, and when he arrived in another little green government Plymouth, an angry crowd of 500 whites lined the sidewalk, again yelling, "Go home, nigger" and other epithets. I followed Doar, McShane, and Meredith into the elevator, along with Claude Sitton, and up we went to the tenth floor. At the end of the corridor stood Barnett blocking the trustees' door.

Doar firmly asked him to step aside and let Meredith register pursuant to the final court order.

"I politely refuse," said Barnett.

"And we politely leave," said Doar.

Someone asked Barnett if he would go to jail himself rather than submit to federal authority, as he had ordered other state officials to do.

"Well, I would if I could," he said—another one of his nonsensical utterances.

The next day, September 26, Doar and McShane decided to go back to Oxford with Meredith. They flew into Oxford again from New Orleans, where a large crowd of marshals, local sheriffs and cops, newsmen, and angry citizens awaited at the little airport. A half-mile from the campus, a roadblock had been set up at the

intersection of Fifth Street and University Avenue, behind which stood Lieutenant Governor Paul Johnson, a sour-looking man in a snap-brim hat, and fifty heavily armed state highway patrolmen in gas masks. Governor Barnett's plane had been turned back because of bad weather, and it was left to Johnson to refuse the federal force once again. A crowd of 2,500, including many students, had gathered at the roadblock. Two hundred police and sheriff's deputies carrying clubs surrounded the campus.

Violence was definitely in the air. Johnson, obviously alarmed at the situation, took a bullhorn from a highway patrolman and said, "I plead with you to return to the campus. We have a tense situation and it is dangerous for you to be here. Someone could easily be killed, and it could be an innocent party. If you want to have the nigger in Ole Miss, just stay where you are."

I was standing directly behind Meredith, who was dressed as usual in a suit, tie, and white shirt and was carrying his ever-present briefcase. He stood as calm and expressionless as if he were waiting in line to get into a movie theater. McShane tried to hand Johnson papers ordering Meredith's admission; Johnson just let them fall to the ground.

"Governor, we need to go to the campus now and register Mr. Meredith," McShane said.

Johnson then took Barnett's proclamation from his pocket and read it. It cited the Tenth Amendment, which says that powers not specifically delegated to the federal government are reserved to the states, and it said in part that "I do hereby proclaim that the operation of the public schools, universities and colleges of the State of Mississippi is vested in the duly elected and appointed officials to uphold and enforces the laws duly and legally enacted by the Legislature of the State of Mississippi, regardless of this unwarranted, illegal and arbitrary usurpation of powers; and to interpose the State Sovereignty and themselves

between the people of the State and any body politic seeking to usurp such power." McShane's face turned redder, and he then moved up and tried to physically push Johnson aside. The highway patrolmen gathered around the lieutenant governor pushed back. It was a tense moment, until McShane finally said, "Let's go," and the federal party left, driving north to the Millington Air Force Base near Memphis, Tennessee.

The next day, Thursday, September 27, the Meredith party drove at high speed toward Oxford from Memphis, this time with a force of fifty marshals carrying guns and tear gas. A government plane was overhead maintaining contact with Bobby Kennedy in Washington. At Oxford another huge angry crowd awaited. With the threat of violence clearly high, Kennedy ordered the Meredith party to turn back again.

During a Friday conversation with Bobby Kennedy, Barnett, having run out of wiggle room, finally accepted the inevitable. He agreed that Meredith would be allowed to slip onto the campus quietly on Sunday and be registered Monday morning. Barnett told Kennedy that it would be better to bring Meredith in on Sunday, since it would be relatively quiet on campus. During the conversation, he pleaded with Kennedy to order the federal marshals to pull a gun on him at Oxford, to force him to stand aside for the television cameras and save just a little of his face. "I've got to have a show of force," he said. Kennedy coolly told him no. At midnight Saturday, President Kennedy federalized the Mississippi National Guard and sent regular Army troops to wait in Memphis.

I was running back and forth between Jackson and Oxford as the story shifted, a three-hour drive each way, which only added to my fatigue and tension. In Oxford, I was staying at the run-down, one-story, brick Ole Miss Motel on a slope at the edge of town. It was run by a tall, belligerent segregationist named R. J.

(Rusty) Nail. He didn't say so straight out, but based on a few hints, Sitton and I assumed he was a proud member of the Klan. He did say that though he was accepting the business of Yankee reporters, this would not be a healthy place for people like us to be when the forces ready to act against Meredith and the hated Kennedys began to have their say. When the moment of truth arrived, he said, they would be arriving from all over the South, armed and ready. Meantime, he said, he had whiskey for sale, and I bought a fifth of Old Hickory.

As usual I asked for a room near the front adjoining Sitton's. We were somewhat dismayed to see that the windows were not big enough to escape through. I noticed immediately a sour smell which I knew to be a sign that the air-conditioning filter had not been changed in a long time. I had occasional asthma and the bitter air affected my breathing and my sleep—adding again to my escalating tense weariness.

I got up groggy Sunday morning, September 30, and walked into the downtown area with Claude. There were a lot of cars and pickup trucks with Tennessee, Louisiana, Alabama, Georgia, and even Texas plates parked around town. By the time I had country ham, eggs, grits, buttermilk biscuits, and three cups of strong coffee in Faulkner's booth at the Mansion Inn and walked across the overpass in the cool fall morning under a blue sky and onto the campus, a crowd was already forming. Word had obviously gotten out that Meredith was coming that day—a word no doubt deliberately leaked by Barnett and/or his Citizens Council advisers. The resistance fighters arriving were rough-looking Snopesian characters, many with angry faces and sagging bellies, in a variety of work clothes. They definitely were not students, and I wondered with Claude how many pistols, shotguns, and rifles were in the cars and pick-ups we had seen on the streets. They had been summoned to duty by no less an authority than

the governor of Mississippi himself—through his defiant statements—and so here they were massing, ready to repel the “nigger” and his infidel protectors.

By this time, keen to provide all of the detail that a *Newsweek* story demanded, I was carrying two small Audubon books that included the illustrated names of the birds, trees, and flowers of the South, and I had noted as I arrived in Oxford that the luxuriant oaks and maples in the countryside were beginning to turn and sage was beginning to color in the fields. I didn't know exactly when Meredith was coming, but coming he was. The final showdown was at hand.

Two hundred booing spectators were waiting as a small government plane carrying James Meredith and Justice Department officials landed at the tiny Oxford airport that afternoon and headed down Highway 6 toward the campus. Roadside fields glowed yellow with goldenrod. On a nearby hill a small boy stood waving a Confederate flag. More than 300 U.S. marshals had already entered the campus in cars and Army trucks and set up a command post in the Lyceum. Meredith was rushed onto the campus and ushered quietly into a sparsely furnished two-room suite on the second floor of the Baxter Hall dormitory. There were cots set up for eight marshals who would provide him round-the-clock protection.

An historic event imminent, with mass violence almost certain, *Newsweek* had geared up for a cover story. My Atlanta bureau colleague Joe Cumming would come in to help with the reporting, and Peter Goldman, the national affairs writer usually assigned to boil down my civil rights files, would fly down from New York to get the feel and look of the place. Goldman was a sensitive and felicitous writer who always distilled my long and sometimes disconnected reports into clear and poetical prose. He was originally from St. Louis but, with his slight figure, pale face,



unruly light hair, and nasal voice, he looked and sounded like a prototypical New Yorker—not the kind of instantly recognizable Yankee, frankly, I wanted to have by my side when the rednecks erupted. After lunch I got into my Hertz car and drove the seventy-five miles over to Memphis to pick him up. I brought him up to date on the two-hour drive back.

We could see a huge mob surging back and forth but moving toward the Lyceum as we drove across the railroad overpass onto the campus. A two-deep wall of marshals had formed in the driveway in front of the Lyceum's white columns. Rocks and bottles were flying and the marshals, wearing gas masks, helmets, and orange vests with pockets for tear gas canisters, were rapidly firing tear gas shells into the crowd. Maddened screams and taunts rent the air.

“Welcome to Mississippi, Peter,” I said.

I parked the car beside some bushes, got out, and told Peter to follow me. “If anybody comes up to us, let me do the talking,” I said. It was clear as I ran that we were not going to be able to get into the Lyceum where the marshals and Justice operatives had set up their command post and where the Justice officials were on the phone with Bobby Kennedy in Washington. There were too many rocks and bottles flying and too much tear gas.

I led Peter as we ran weaving through the crowd and we ducked into the Science Building across the grove and into what appeared to be a lab classroom. We crouched beneath windows through which we could see the wild mob rampaging in front of us and hear the angry shouts:

“Kill the nigger!”

“Down with the goddamned Kennedys!”

“Hooray for Ole Ross.”

Nightfall had come and by now the mob numbered 2,500. Peter and I could see little puffs of tear gas wafting through the

trees as the maddened rabble let loose its fury. The sickly sweet smell of the tear gas filled the air, stinging our eyes. The rioters seemed immune to its effects as they rushed forward hurling rocks, bottles, pieces of concrete, and steel rods—anything that could be found or torn loose.

“You goddamned Communists,” one screamed.

“You nigger lovers go to hell,” yelled another.

Three neatly dressed young men walked into the room where we kneeled looking out the windows. I took them to be students. They seemed to know their way around.

“Anybody in here with you?” one of them asked.

“Naw. Just us chickens,” I said in my most elongated Southern drawl. They harvested several bottles of some kind of liquids, and quietly left. Probably acid to throw at the marshals, I told Peter.

Outside, the badly outnumbered and outgunned marshals were fighting for their lives. They crouched now behind their cars as bullets, projectiles, and glass rained around them. We could hear gunshots through the melee. At 9 P.M. we saw a tall wild-eyed man in a Stetson hat mount the Confederate statue at the top of the grove and encourage the rioters. This was retired Army General Edwin Walker, who had been recently called back from Germany by President Kennedy for making incendiary remarks that increased East–West tensions. Five years before this night, he had commanded troops sent to Little Rock by Eisenhower.

“This time I am on the right side,” he shouted. “Don’t let up now,” he exhorted the mob from his perch. “You may lose this battle but you will have to be heard. You must be prepared for possible death. If you are not, go home now.”

The Mississippi state troopers, whose protective service Barnett had promised, had retreated to their cars behind the Lyceum and did nothing to stop the violence. Some of them sneeringly

referred to the marshals as "Kennedy's Coon Clan." Then I watched stunned and angry as they drove in a slow line—I counted sixty-eight cars in all—past our window and out of the campus, leaving the marshals on their own. The front entrance to the campus was now unguarded, and more rioters poured in, armed with .22 squirrel guns, high-powered rifles, shotguns, knives, clubs, and blackjacks.

"Give us the nigger and we'll quit," one of the rioters shouted at the marshals.

During a lull in the battle I signaled Peter to follow me. I was going to make a run for the Lyceum. We dashed across the grove, now profusely littered with empty tear gas shells, rocks, and bottles, onto the porch of the Lyceum and into the building. The lobby was jammed with marshals, Justice officials, and a few reporters. Associated Press reporter Bill Grider lay on the floor bleeding. He had gone outside and been hit in the back by a shotgun.

At 9:30 P.M., an old red fire truck commandeered by the rioters rumbled across the Grove with students and outsiders arrayed behind it in a charge that broke past the marshals' line and hit a tree. The driver was rescued by the rioters, sobbing, and then came a bulldozer, stolen from a nearby construction site, but it also hit a tree.

"What we need is a machine gun," one of the rioters cried. Another, armed with a shotgun, fired on a squad of marshals on the right flank of their line, hitting Marshal Gene Same of Indiana in the neck. He bled almost to death before a local doctor could be convoyed through the mob to treat him.

At 10 P.M., Deputy Attorney General Nick Katzenbach, who had accompanied Meredith to the campus, called Kennedy and said, "For God's sake, we need those troops." They arrived on campus soon, a hometown National Guard cavalry troop com-

manded by blue-eyed Captain Murry Falkner, William Faulkner's nephew. (The nephew's branch of the family spelled their name without the "u.") Shortly after, as the riot wore on, his wrist was cracked by a brick. Just before midnight, Barnett, urged by his Citizens Council advisers, went on statewide radio again and said, "I call on all Mississippians to keep the faith and courage. We will never surrender."

The besieged Lyceum looked like a scene out of *Gone with the Wind*. Wounded and wearied marshals lay everywhere on the bloodied floor, smoking cigarettes, drinking coffee, and eating franks and sauerkraut brought in through the mob. Snipers among the rabble had opened fire from buildings at the top of the grove. Right after 1 A.M., a border patrolman staggered in, shot in the leg.

I opened the front door of the Lyceum and went out onto the porch for a better view of the battle. Suddenly I heard successive splatting noises right behind me. I looked over my right shoulder and saw four bullet holes stitched into the white wood column behind me, six inches from my head. I went back inside and angrily announced, "If I was James Meredith, I wouldn't go to school with these people." (That quote appeared next week in *Time* magazine, attributed to a marshal.)

The marshals were about to run out of tear gas when a red truck pulled up with a new supply. Marshals had had to club a Mississippi state cop to get it through. By now the rioters were hurling Molotov cocktails—Coke and Pepsi bottles filled with gasoline. We were told that Meredith, meanwhile, had retired at 10 P.M., guarded by forty marshals, and that all was quiet where he was secured. At 2:30, the marshals were running dangerously low on tear gas again. McShane, who was in charge of them, called Washington for permission to return fire with sidearms, but Bobby Kennedy said no.

Now the rioters began setting cars on fire. Using huge stones, they also set up roadblocks at the campus entrance and when rescue trucks tried to go around them they were bombarded with a hail of rocks, bottles, and Molotov cocktails. The state troopers who had left the battlefield lounged outside the gate, watching and doing nothing.

At 4 A.M., 162 Army jeeps and trucks loaded with soldiers arrived to reinforce the marshals. They took up positions in front of the Lyceum, M-14 rifles at their sides. Shortly after 5 A.M. they formed a solid line with the marshals and moved forward through the Grove, driving the remaining 200 or so rioters from the campus and across the overpass. As the first rays of sun rose pink across the littered Grove, the horn of one of the burning cars gave off a ghostly wail and beyond the entrance came the chant "Two, four, six, eight, we don't want to integrate."

I walked bleary-eyed and sick with revulsion off the campus at 6. A.M., still running on pure adrenaline. I suddenly realized that though I should probably have been scared, I wasn't. I was too angry, and too pumped up. As I came off the campus and reached the corner of Lamar Street and University Avenue, I saw a crowd gathered, screaming and pitching bottles at jeeploads of soldiers hurrying to the campus. State patrolmen leaned languidly against their cars. A platoon of military police soon arrived, to be greeted by missiles and a fifty-five-gallon oil drum tossed onto a windshield from a balcony. There were a few Negroes among the MP's.

"Why'd they have to send the niggers in here?" growled one protester. Soon the troops were firing live ammunition over the rioters' heads into the trees, and they were dispersed. The National Guardsmen led thirty captives onto the campus and into the Lyceum. The prize catch was General Walker, his arrest ordered by Katzenbach. He was spotted near the town square,

unshaven and haggard but still wearing his Stetson. "I appear," he said ruefully after being questioned in the Lyceum, "to be taken in custody." He was charged with insurrection, held on \$500,000 bail, and later in the week sent to Springfield, Missouri, for psychiatric examination.

I lurched back to the Ole Miss Motel, and stopped at the front office to see if I had any phone messages.

"So, they forced the little nigger in, did they?" asked Rusty Nail.

"Yep, he's an Ole Miss Rebel now," I said.

"He won't last long," Nail said.

I showered, shaved, changed clothes, and headed back toward the campus. I hadn't eaten for twenty-four hours but I wasn't hungry. The downtown mob had been dispersed and driven off. As I crossed the overpass, a slack-bellied Mississippi highway patrolman whom I had gotten to know slightly was leaning against the guardrail, smoking a cigar.

"Where you going, Mister *Newsweek*?"

"Over to the Ly-See-um," I drawled. "Meredith is holding a press conference."

"If that ain't the goddamndest thing I ever heard of," he said with disgust, "a nigger holding a press conference."

Meredith entered the Lyceum under heavy guard at 7:30 A.M., wearing a blue-gray suit and carrying his briefcase. He looked as if he had dressed for a business meeting, and his impassive face revealed not the slightest emotion. Actually he looked fresh and rested, while everybody else looked exhausted and frazzled. The school registrar silently handed him a form, which he signed without speaking. Moments later he walked across the campus to his first class (Colonial American history) in a knot of marshals.

"The blood is on your hands, nigger bastard," a white student screamed at him.

I was told that not a soul spoke to him in his class as he took notes in a looseleaf binder with marshals stationed outside the door. A one-sentence notice was tacked onto the Lyceum entrance. "Pursuant to the mandate of the federal courts, the orders for the registration of Meredith have been followed."

At mid-morning, Meredith sat behind a fold-up card table in the lobby of the Lyceum to meet the large press assemblage, dressed impeccably in the same suit, briefcase at his side. He said he had slept fitfully through the night, that he could hear the uproar, and gunshots, but was unaware of the full ferocity of the riot. And was he pleased?

"No," he said with a tight little smile. "This is not a happy occasion."

By Tuesday there were 14,000 Army troops bivouacked in tents on a hillside behind the campus. In New York, Gordon Manning had put researchers to work on Mississippi and came up with a startling fact, which was the lead in our cover story:

In the fall of 1862, Gen. U.S. Grant had driven deep into Mississippi. By December Grant's federal troops had reached the young and prosperous town of Oxford. They billeted on the 14-year-old campus of the University of Mississippi—then almost deserted by the exodus of students to the Confederate Army. Grant's troops settled in at Oxford until Christmas Day; their boots echoed in the town square, and their wounded lay . . . in the University's Lyceum building. Almost exactly 100 years after Grant's invasion, the tramp of federal boots was heard once again in the streets of the tiny college town.

School attendance was still off from the accustomed 5,000 to 1,200 two days after the riot when Nick Katzenbach, the balding

deputy attorney general, who had accompanied Meredith on campus, announced the federal casualties from the all-night rampage: 168 marshals, more than a third of the total force, were injured, twenty-nine with gunshot wounds. A half-dozen had acid burns. Two hundred soldiers were hurt.

I had already been informed that Monday, after daylight came and the smoke cleared in the Grove, passersby found the body of red-headed Agence France-Presse reporter Paul Guihard in a clump of bushes. He had been shot in the back. There was one other death: a white Oxford repairman who, standing at the perimeter of the riot, was hit in the head, probably by a stray bullet.

Downtown, the federalized Mississippi National Guard ringed the courthouse, and anger still ran high. Oxford was under military lockdown. Guardsmen and Army troops set up roadblocks and searched the trunks of cars for weapons. Next to the courthouse I saw what I thought was an ironic sight: Oxford native Captain Murry Falkner standing there with a grim look on his clean face, holding a gun on his fellow townsmen, some of them undoubtedly his childhood schoolmates and family acquaintances.

Peter Goldman flew back to New York on Tuesday, and most of the visiting media departed, too. The *New York Times*, meanwhile, had sent a feature writer down to write sidebars. A day after he arrived, Rusty Nail called Sitton into his office and said, "You'd better get that guy the hell out of here. He must be crazy." He had asked Nail to fix him up with one of the Negro maids—an act of pure insanity in Mississippi in 1962. Claude had him back on a plane to New York that afternoon. I stayed around doing more interviews and on Thursday drove back to Jackson and checked back into the Sun 'N' Sand motel. Jackson's Western Union, where I filed my copy to New York, stayed open all night. I had two drinks, went out to Le Fleur's on the edge of town for some crawfish bisque, came back and sat down facing my Lettera



22. portable sick with fatigue and tension. I had filled two entire notebooks with hastily scribbled facts, observations, and quotes, and the stomach-grinding task at hand was to discard the unimportant and render the rest into comprehensible English. I sat there until daybreak, smoking Camels and drinking coffee, wrote twenty pages of double-spaced copy, and drove them down to the Western Union on Capitol Street. Peter Goldman would put it all together Friday and the magazine would be assembled and sent to the printer Saturday night.

Then I drove back to Ole Miss. By the weekend Meredith was safe enough to walk to class accompanied by just two marshals, one in front, one behind. Soldiers, though, were still camped in tents on a hill behind his dorm. On the way to the library Friday, a coed shouted as he passed: "Why doesn't somebody kill him?"

That week, John F. Kennedy made a nationwide address to explain why he had sent the troops. "Americans are free to disagree with the law, but not to disobey it," he said, "for we are a government of laws, and not of men. And no man, however prominent or powerful, and no mob, however unruly or contentious, is entitled to defy a court of law."

This was the first riot I had seen and been in the middle of. And as I flew home for the weekend Saturday, carrying in my suitcase three of the still-pungent tear gas shells I had picked up in the Grove, I couldn't get it out of my mind—the tear gas, the bullets, Meredith's impassive face, the roiling mob, the marshals, Mississippi state cops driving sixty-eight cars off the campus. As it progressed the riot seemed to develop the energy of a cyclone, sweeping up everybody in its path and turning them into maddened animals. I had seen some bad things up to then in my native South, but nothing approaching this. I for some reason remembered seeing *The Birth of a Nation* when I was a small boy (my Aunt Belle took me, the first movie I ever saw), and the

frightening sight of a Klan mob pulling a black man from a jail and lynching him. A mob, obviously, was capable of doing things an individual wouldn't do, although there were on Mississippi's sorry record plenty of savage individual murders and lynchings. I was ashamed as well as angry. These were my fellow Southerners. We came from the same gene pool—Irish and Scotch and English—and most of us from the same impoverished past. But I had identified not with them, but with Meredith, the black interloper.

When I got back to Ole Miss the next week, Meredith was able to get to class alone. The hottest steam seemed to have gone out of the white students. I had made friends with an Ole Miss history professor named Jim Silver, a craggy-faced transplanted Yankee who had been in Oxford for twenty-five years. He was the first person in either the faculty or the student body to befriend Meredith. He invited him to dinner at his two-story home on the campus one night and included me and Claude Sitton. Silver and I drank a lot of bourbon. Claude was with drinking as he was with everything: prudent. Meredith said he sometimes had a drink but he declined one now. "I have to keep my head clear at all times," he said. Meredith was cool and composed, almost monosyllabic in conversation. He said he didn't care what the white students did or said. "I don't waste any time thinking about them," he said. "I have too much studying to do."

Next day, I walked across the campus with him to the cafeteria. There were a few shouts and taunts. "Go home, nigger" was the favorite. There was a popping sound, like gunfire, behind us. Meredith didn't flinch. He just kept walking, his eyes straight ahead. Someone had exploded a cherry bomb on the sidewalk behind us. "That happens all the time," he said.

I asked him if he had made any friends on campus. He looked at me with a tight smile. "Haven't you noticed that they don't like me?" he said.

We went through the food line and he served himself the makings of a ham sandwich and got an iced tea. We sat at a table by ourselves. The white students ringed us several tables away, looking at us and whispering. He said he knew some of the students were sympathetic to him but that the few who had spoken to him had been ostracized by their schoolmates.

“You must have nerves of steel,” I said.

“They don’t bother me. They do what they do. I do what I have to do. I don’t have time to get involved in what they are doing or thinking.”

Then he explained to me his “divine responsibility to change the status of my people.” He had had, he told me, a “master plan” since high school and was on a “divine mission” to see that no one trampled on his pride or on that of the “multitudes” who would follow his lead.

“Are you a good student?”

“About average, but I have to work hard to keep up.”

“What are you planning to do after you graduate?”

“I don’t know. I may stay here and go to law school. Or I may not stay at all, since my mission is accomplished,” he said with his funny little laugh. Two months later I telephoned him on a Friday from Atlanta.

“Meredith here,” he answered. He didn’t like using his first name, or being called by it. He signed his letters “J. H. Meredith.” I’d come to like Meredith, I realized, his quirky humor and certainly his personal bravery. I identified with him, too, since I also was an outsider who liked personal discipline, but didn’t like authority, didn’t like anybody telling me I couldn’t do something. I didn’t, however, think I’d have the nerve to do what he was doing. Again I thought he was either the bravest, or craziest, person I’d ever known. It was probably some of both. In any case, for whatever reason, he seemed to open up to me in a way he

hadn't with other reporters. So I told him I'd like to come down and see how he was doing.

"Listen, I'm flying into Memphis and renting a car and getting to the campus about two o'clock. Where will I find you?" I said.

"Heh, heh, heh," he laughed his funny little laugh. "You'll see me. I'm not very hard to spot on this campus."

Meredith had by then brought his wife's automobile to the campus: an almost new white Thunderbird. He himself owned a blue Cadillac. This inflamed the white students even more. "Niggers" were supposed to drive old Chevies and Fords, not Thunderbirds and Cadillacs. Meredith, of course, had every right to have a fancy car and bring it to the campus, but I couldn't help asking him if in doing so he was being deliberately provocative, sticking his thumb in the eyes of the white students again.

"Heh, heh, heh. Actually I'm thinking of selling it and getting me a big black Lincoln Continental, just like Chancellor Williams," he said slyly. My admiration for him went up. He was totally fearless.

He said he was much encouraged by the mail he was getting: 200 letters a week from all over the country, most of them from sympathetic white people. He said his family was feeling a lot of pressure in Kosciusko, though. Their house had been shot into. Teachers in the local Negro school were told they would be fired if they were seen in Meredith's company when he visited his family.

One night that week Hal Holbrook brought his Mark Twain monologue to the school auditorium. Jim Silver arranged for tickets for himself, me, Claude Sitton, and Meredith. I sat beside Meredith as Holbrook, dressed in a white suit and smoking a cigar, acted Twain's speeches and writing, including a passage about Huck and Nigger Jim—a subtle condemnation of racism.

Many applauded Holbrook's performance, but as usual Meredith was silent and noncommittal.

Jim Silver wrote a long essay soon after the riot called "Mississippi: The Closed Society," which he presented in my old haunt of Asheville at a Historical Society convention. In it, he vividly described how Mississippians, including even its business and political elite, barricaded themselves behind their wounded pride, held delusions about their victimization by hostile outsiders, and absolutely did not believe themselves bound by the federal laws that the rest of the country peacefully followed.

The smell of the tear gas stayed in my nose and the maddened screams of the hate-filled mob played in my heads for weeks after I got back home to Atlanta. The anger lingered too. I was not so much angry at the rabble as at Mississippi's political, social, and religious leaders. The rabble were, well, the rabble—ignorant and struggling white folks. But the leaders, the members of what in Mississippi passed for the intellectually elite, most of the clergy and the press, knew better. And they had, either by their active encouragement, as in the case of the governor and the Citizens Council, or by their silent abdication of responsibility, actually licensed and encouraged the rioters. They had done their state a great disservice, and Mississippi would pay that price and carry that stigma for many years to come.

But as I thought about it more, I also realized that the Meredith crisis represented a singular bright moment in our country's history. The whole force of the United States—physical, legal, and moral—had been brought to bear to protect the constitutional right of one tiny black man. And that was something extraordinary to witness, and to be proud of as a citizen.