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**The Invisible Press**

**White establishment owners of Jackson Sun largely ignored rising tide of civil rights movement**

By DYLAN T. LOVAN  
The Jackson Sun

A cool and cloudy West Tennessee day, Nov. 8, 1960.

Voters are casting their ballots for John F. Kennedy or Richard Nixon in a close presidential race. The Jackson Sun publishes front page stories that afternoon about the expected heavy voter turnout, a Jackson veterans program and a local banker's promotion.

Across town on the Lane College campus, a mild insurrection is brewing.

Taking a cue from Election Day protests across the South, 150 students from the area's only black college mount a march on court square.

Jutting signs into the air that call for voting fairness for blacks in Haywood and Fayette counties, the students add ranks from Merry High School.

The first group is arrested at Cumberland and Main streets, two blocks from the courthouse. The second group makes it to Liberty and Main, near Woolworth's, where some of the same students had been participating in lunch counter sit-ins. The last group makes it to the courthouse.

Police arrest 144 for disorderly conduct, filling the city jail with misdemeanor offenders, including 10 teen-agers and

The Commercial Appeal ran this photo following the arrest of 144 black people, mostly Lane College students, on Nov. 8, 1960, which was election day. The two unidentified students in the photo were among a group marching to downtown Jackson in protest of voting rights abuses in Haywood and Fayette counties. The Jackson Sun refused to run photos of protests and demonstrations during the civil rights movement.

66 women.

Three blocks away, at The Jackson Sun, editors reluctantly send John Parish to get the story. Parish, a 37-year-old reporter in his fourth year at The Sun, and a photographer go to the jail. The photographer takes pictures and Parish faithfully writes a 22-paragraph story.

Parish's story would be buried on Page 11 the next day, near the back of a 16-page edition, with the headline "Negro Students Are Jailed Here After Parade." The photographs would never make it into print.

The downplaying of such news, which would be splashed across the front page in today's newspapers, was the order of the day in the 1960s. The Jackson Sun, like many small Southern newspapers, largely ignored the civil rights movement as it occurred in its backyard. The Sun never ran stories on local civil rights actions on its front page and never took an editorial position in 1960, despite a bus boycott, marches, arrests, weeks of sit-ins at lunch counters and a downtown business boycott.

Trumpeted across the front page of The Jackson Sun the day after the arrests was Kennedy's election as president, followed by a Parish story saying Nixon won Madison County. A story about a local woodworking company's $90,000 payroll made the bottom of page one.

Readers that day had to wade through stories about the Trenton book club and a church meeting in Adamsville - not to mention the entire sports section - before they came to the civil rights story.

**Largely ignored by Jackson Sun**

Down the road in Memphis, The Commercial Appeal handled things a bit differently. After the Jackson protest, that paper ran a large photo of the students in the Jackson jail and a page 10 story under the headline: "Jackson Jails Nearly 200 in Negro Protest Parade." During the early 1960s, The Commercial Appeal - and the now-defunct Press Scimitar - ran stories on West Tennessee civil rights actions, sometimes with photographs that showed protests or rural living conditions.

In the state capital, The Tennessean went even further. When 1960 arrived, the paper had already editorially endorsed school integration. When sit-ins began, The Tennessean jumped on the story and regularly splashed news of civil disobedience across its front pages, along with searing reports from such writers as David Halberstam, who recently wrote "The Children," a book about the Nashville civil rights movement.

The Tennessee sit-in movement had started in Nashville in February 1960 when 124 black people left a downtown church and planted themselves at segregated lunch counters.

"A revolution was under way," said John Seigenthaler, editor and publisher of The Tennessean during most of the 1960s.

The Tennessean and a few other newspapers recognized that revolution and seized on the significance of the civil rights movement, both locally and nationally. Why, then, did The Jackson Sun, like many smaller Southern papers, handle things differently?

**Editorial policy was clear**

In the heat of the civil rights era, The Jackson Sun was owned by Sally Pigford, who had inherited ownership from her husband in 1945. The Pigfords were staunch conservatives with deep ties to the rulers of Jackson. They had ignored news in the black community for decades.

Pigford controlled The Sun as its president in 1960. The company was run by a board of its 13 shareholders. All were white. That year, The Sun employed only two blacks, a press worker and a chauffeur.

Pigford was rarely involved in day-to-day operations. She would show up once a month for board meetings, though her racial agenda - and the board's - was clear.

The news media in Jackson - newspapers and radio - had a silent agreement to downplay civil rights news, some of Pigford's former employees remember.

"They just wouldn't print any of it," recalled Cecil Flowers, who retired as a vice president at The Sun in 1988.

In fact, the newspaper Pigford inherited was non-controversial as a rule.

"It was rare for them to take an editorial position on any local issue," said Delores Ballard, a Sun reporter in the late '60s and '70s.

Editorials generally discussed community "good news," such as Union University's growth or the observance of local veterans. A November 1960 editorial shortly after the elections discussed the importance of storm sewer gratings.

Pigford and her top executive in 1960, General Manager Albert Stone Sr., were "ultra conservatives" who preferred to maintain their small city's status quo, said Jim Shearin, a photographer at the time.

Stone, lauded by many former Sun employees for his managerial ability and leadership, had one simple job, Parish said.

"His main goal in life was to keep Mrs. Pigford happy," Parish wrote in a book he is working on about his life experiences. "He had fairly good newspaper instincts, but in most cases he chose the path of least resistance and wasn't interested in muddying waters at his age."

 Stone, who joined The Sun in 1919, ran the paper with a bellowing voice and shrewd business practices as publisher for nearly 30 years. He retired in 1973.

Most of Stone's former employees looked fondly upon the man who once told Kennedy at a White House junket that the young president needed to "balance the budget."

Stone's head man in the newsroom in 1960 was Harris Brown, who was nine years older than Stone and shared his boss's conservative views.

Brown's favorite topics for the paper were the local Rotary Club and "anything related to one of the three railroads that served Jackson," Parish remembered.

"There was an old clique here in Jackson" in the 1960s, Flowers said. "They didn't want anything to change."

Among the things the paper didn't want to change was its interaction with the black community. The Sun - like many papers in the South - had been practicing racial discrimination in its hiring and its news coverage for years.

At the time, blacks were seldom named in the paper, but were instead labeled simply "a Negro." Photos of blacks were rarely published.

Black people were not included in the society page listings of weddings, engagements and births. Black obituaries ran under smaller headlines than whites. Murders in the black community received less attention than those in the white community. "Just another Saturday night knifin'," former staffer Johnny Malone remembers editors saying.

Under Stone's leadership - and his urging to Pigford - The Sun would change its editorial policies toward blacks in the late 1960s. Sun executives met with black leaders who threatened a boycott if coverage and employment practices toward blacks weren't changed.

The Sun conceded, and Stone agreed to make new hires for front-office clerical jobs and enlist Lane Professor Horace Savage part-time to write about Jackson's black community.

The Sun would not hire a full-time black reporter until 1973. That reporter, Michael Mercer, says that even though it can be wrongheaded to look at history with modern sensibilities, the paper's lack of coverage of the civil rights movement was wrong.

"It was unethical to suppress the news," said Mercer, who teaches journalism at Auburn University. "There were a significant number of people who were taking the paper who couldn't see themselves in the paper. But nobody cared then."

**Avoid disruption at all costs**

Many who worked at The Jackson Sun at the time say the suppression of black news was deliberate when the paper was confronted with the civil rights movement in 1960.

They say the paper downplayed or ignored the sit-ins and protests because its owners endorsed the white establishment's strategy: avoid disruptions of the peace at all costs. And some defend the paper's stance, saying the owners wanted to do their part to avoid violent confrontations and the like that were beginning to occur in other cities.

Looking through The Sun's archives proves that point. Like the Election Day march story, a string of stories about downtown lunch counter sit-ins were placed in the back of the paper.

When Lane Professor Preston E. Stewart was fined $15 in City Court for snapping a photo of a sign on a Coke machine in a sporting goods store that said "White Customers Only," the story went on page 12.

Some civil rights stories did run on The Sun's front page, but they never included news of the local bus boycott, lunch counter sit-ins, the mass arrests or the business boycott. One story played very large on the front page trumpeted Southern legislators' defiance of civil rights.

The only front page item that related directly to Jackson was an Associated Press story about a Vanderbilt student who was expelled for being a leader in the Jackson lunch counter sit-ins. Later, the paper ran front-page wire stories on the voting rights struggle in Haywood and Fayette counties, where national attention was drawn to the creation of a Tent City for displaced black sharecroppers.

"The thinking seemed to be that if we published 'all that trash about Martin Luther King Jr. and the Selma protests, the blacks in Jackson might become uppity and restive,'" said Malone, who worked as a Sun copy editor and news editor from 1963 to 1999.

"The result: When I laid out The Sun's front page, the Vietnam War always got the lead position. Associated Press wire copy about the Alabama marches was relegated to the bottom desk drawer. It didn't make the newspaper."

Some black activists accept the premise that The Sun's owners and managers didn't want to shake up the town's sleepy status quo. And some said they didn't expect much more from The Sun.

That's "just the way life was," says Frank Walker, an early civil rights activist in Jackson.

"The media here was The Jackson Sun and radio stations WTJS, WDXI and WJAK," explains Wesley McClure, a civil rights activist who is now president of Lane College. "All were basically silent about the local civil rights movement. I did not then, and do not to this day, fault the media, and specifically The Jackson Sun, for covering things the way they did. ... That was the way of life back then. One wouldn't have expected much coverage of incidents of this nature." McClure said.

In a column he wrote about the paper, Malone mused that whites throughout Jackson often commended The Sun's civil rights-era owners "for helping keep blacks from stirring up trouble here."

The paper also downplayed news of white reaction to the civil rights protests. It ran a story on the local Federation for Constitutional Government, the Tennessee version of the White Citizens Councils that formed to defend segregation, on page 16. That story detailed how local leaders, including a circuit judge, a local sheriff and the Madison County district attorney, met to hear speeches calling for fighting for "the Southern way of life ... to the bitter end."

Downplaying race relations kept the civil rights movement from boiling over in Jackson, said Parish, who left The Sun in 1979 to become press secretary for Gov. Lamar Alexander.

"I think the proof of the pudding is that Jackson was a lot more peaceful and solved all of these problems as much as they did," Parish said in an interview at his Franklin, Tenn., home.

"Anybody can look back on it any time they want to and say that was the wrong way to do it, but I still think it had a big role in the transition being as smooth as it was," he said. "It wasn't easy and it wasn't pleasant at the time, and it wasn't nice and like every place else in the South, Jackson had a long way to come, but I think they made some strides."

Parish, now 77, said the way the paper suppressed protest news made school integration easier. "I think it helped that we didn't fan anything on either side."

Shearin, retired after 34 years as a photographer and photo editor at The Commercial Appeal, is an affable man and a part-time gun range instructor. He spoke at his home in the south Memphis suburbs about his experiences at The Sun, where he worked from 1948 to 1962.

He called the sit-ins and other protests in 1960 "not a big deal to the paper," because there was never any serious violence here.

Nevertheless, Shearin, 66, said he was often sent downtown to Woolworth's where Lane students conducted sit-ins at the segregated lunch counters.

"Every time the police went, I went." But none of his sit-in photos made it into the paper.

Shearin confesses that at his young age - 26 in 1960 - he didn't appreciate the importance of the civil rights movement. The Sun, he said, was just a small-town newspaper that tried to avoid stepping on any toes.

"By the same yardstick that you would use for other newspapers of that size and that pay, I'd say (coverage) was probably about average," he said. "Now, that's not to say they were or weren't fair. They went in the mainstream of a smaller town."

McClure, the civil rights activist and Lane president, agrees.

"The Jackson Sun was consistent with what other newspapers in the region were doing."

**Other papers taking notice**

For large newspapers - and even a few that were smaller than The Jackson Sun - the protests brewing in the South were a major story, one of civil disobedience and a toppling of the old order.

Along with Tennessee's major metropolitan newspapers - The Tennessean in Nashville and The Commercial Appeal in Memphis - most major dailies throughout the country heaped attention on the civil rights story.

"It was well known that certain papers, The Tennessean and The (Louisville) Courier-Journal, had a reputation for giving balanced coverage," said Merv Aubespin, an associate editor at The Courier-Journal and the paper's first black reporter.

Attention to civil rights by the mainstream white media started to open up in 1955 after the killing of Emmett Till in Mississippi, according to Gene Roberts, a Southerner who covered civil rights for the New York Times and later served as editor of the Philadelphia Inquirer. Till, a 14-year-old boy, was brutally murdered by whites after he allegedly whistled at a white woman.

Even so, the nation's attention was not exactly riveted by news and pictures of blacks being arrested, even brutalized, in the late 1950s and early 1960s, Roberts said in a recent Freedom Forum panel on the civil rights movement. It was not until 1963, when Bull Connor turned the fire hoses on black children in Birmingham that the whole world decided to watch, Roberts said.

As the civil rights movement took hold in Nashville in 1960, The Tennessean made sure it was there, publishing stories that included the protesters' perspectives. It published photographs of movement leaders as soon as the first sit-in occurred in February.

U.S. Rep. John Lewis of Georgia was among the black college students who launched the sit-ins in Nashville in 1960. Lewis, a prominent student leader in the civil rights movement who would give a keynote address at the March on Washington in 1963, said the media's role in publicizing the movement was crucial.

"The coverage of the movement by the media played a major role because the media took the message of the protest to the people," Lewis said. "People could feel it, they could see it. ... They saw these well-dressed, well-behaved students sitting down at the lunch counter. Sitting down and trying to order something to eat, something to drink.

"Without the media, the movement would have been like a bird without wings," he said.

The Tennessean's coverage was directed by Seigenthaler, who would serve 15 months as an assistant to U.S. Attorney General Bobby Kennedy on civil rights issues. Acting as an emissary for President John F. Kennedy during the Freedom Rides across Alabama, Seigenthaler was clubbed unconscious by a white mob as he tried to help a rider to safety.

Nashville city leaders commanded that the paper stop giving front-page coverage to riots that occurred during the sit-ins, because they were hurting the downtown economy.

Then-Chamber of Commerce president Ed Shea accused Seigenthaler of killing "the goose that laid the golden egg for Nashville," Seigenthaler remembers. Just 32 at the time, Seigenthaler left a meeting with city officials saying his paper couldn't comply with Shea's request.

Throughout circulation and advertising sales dips the paper remained steady with civil rights coverage, Seigenthaler said.

"It was not a pleasant position to take," he said. "But we did it anyway."

The Sun, on the other hand, decided to shrink from the story. The owners thought, "If you write it, you will encourage it," said Mercer, the paper's first black reporter.

That pattern was repeated across the South, as local papers downplayed civil rights stories and larger papers brought the story to the nation.

But one tiny Southern newspaper provided even-handed coverage.

The Delta Democrat-Times, in Greenville, Miss., under the leadership of Hodding Carter II and later his son, Hodding Carter III, advocated fairness and equal rights deep in the Mississippi Delta.

Carter II, a Louisiana native, moved to Greenville in 1936 to start a paper, which eventually merged with another to become the Democrat-Times.

In 1946, the paper won the Pulitzer Prize for Carter's editorials about racial and economic intolerance toward Japanese immigrants.

The Greenville paper frequently opined on racial integration in the 1960s, although Carter's son, Hodding III, said his dad didn't consider himself an integrationist.

"We were not a liberal paper," Carter III recently told The Sun. Carter III, an Emmy-winning journalist, served as an assistant secretary of state under President Carter and is the president of the Miami-based Knight Foundation, a charity.

Still, his father's stance on discrimination and voters' rights wasn't a popular one in the Mississippi Delta. The elder Carter often likened discrimination to "moral sickness," and argued that subjugating blacks damaged the white community.

"Dad thought there ought to be a level of decency," Carter III said. "He believed Southern blacks, even under the absurd voting laws, should be able to vote."

The paper passed into Carter III's hands in the mid-1960s, and he and the staff became "100 percenters" against segregation.

Carter III said the same kind of paper - outspoken against the white establishment - might not have thrived in Jackson. "There was a broader sense of the world in Greenville" because many Greenville merchants were Catholic, Jewish and Lebanese descendants who weren't terribly offended by the paper's stance.

"They weren't 100 percent Southerners themselves," Carter III said.

Will Campbell, who was forced out as chaplain at the University of Mississippi for his integrationist views and is now a nationally known author, says Carter's stand was more brave than Carter III describes.

"The Greenville Delta Democrat-Times was enlightened under the leadership of Hodding Carter," Campbell said. "The Charlotte Observer gave some leadership on integration. The Raleigh News and Observer also stepped out. But for the most part, the Southern press didn't have much to be proud of."

Campbell said papers were pressured by white leaders - and white money - to downplay civil rights.

"The Arkansas Democrat was a very conservative newspaper. Editorially, they supported (Gov. Orval) Faubus and opposed integration to the very last. The Arkansas Gazette was just the opposite. But the Gazette lost, lost, lost circulation, and it lost, lost, lost advertisers during that time. Today, the two are one newspaper. Guess which one it is."

Segregationists forced P.D. East and his Petal Paper of Petal, Miss., to close because East actively promoted integration.

"They just ran poor P.D. out of business," Campbell said. Later, with outside financial help, East would publish the Petal Paper into the 1970s as an instrument of civil rights activism. Even then, he was forced to move from town to town.

Black newspapers had more latitude to pursue civil rights stories, and some did tremendous work exposing racism and chronicling the movement. In some cases, the white community even paid attention.

In Memphis, L. Alex Wilson, editor of the black-run Tri-State Defender, published his views on the movement and sent reporters - and himself - to Birmingham, Little Rock and other cities.

Wilson's influence in the black community was so sweeping that a Memphis city official once told him they wouldn't open a meeting without having a copy of The Defender on hand.

He lived for the big, "important" civil rights stories, his widow, Emogene Wilson, said in an interview at her Memphis home. Wielding a more powerful editorial voice that the neighboring black newspaper, The Memphis World, The Defender would follow breaking civil rights news throughout the South under Wilson's guidance.

"He did everything he could to make this paper speak to the ills of this community," Wilson said.

Campbell and Carter both said that most white-run small newspapers in the South in the 1960s wanted to keep things the way they were, and never - or rarely - exposed wrongs.

Carter, who used to read The Jackson Sun occasionally, said The Sun - like the majority of small Southern newspapers - clearly fell into that category. He remembers The Sun as a dry paper.

"It just bored me into a coma," Carter said. The Sun's owners "were probably less than ardent supporters of desegregation."

Carter is correct in his assessment of the owners' views, but many white and many black Jackson residents, as well as many Sun staffers, say the paper's overriding concern was to publish a paper that avoided any local controversy.

Alex Leech, a white man who has been Madison County's mayor for 17 years and started Jackson's first black-format radio station, said The Jackson Sun simply stayed away from anything controversial in 1960.

"Times were just different then. We tried to keep trouble down."

*Sun reporter Todd Kleffman contributed to this story.*