

Dahmer Murder and the Response of the Church

The Facts of the Case

In 1964, as Freedom Summer began to take shape, Sam Bowers organized his White Knights "on the equivalent of a holy." [John Lewis had also made the same claim of course.] As Imperial Wizard, Bowers called for "counterattacks against selected individuals." (JN, 28). Within a few months, Charles Eddie Moore, Henry Hezekiah Dee, Michael Schwerner, James Chaney and Andrew Goodman were dead. Then a year and a half later, the klan targeted Vernon Dahmer, who had most likely incurred Bowers rage by working in Forest County to register black voters.

On January 10, ¹⁹⁶⁶1994, in the predawn hours, Dahmer's home and store were attacked with firebombs (molotov cocktails). Dahmer's wife and three of his seven children--four sons were away in the service--were at home. Dahmer helped them escape through the rear of the house and remained behind to fend off the attackers, firing a shotgun through the wall of flames that engulfed the front of the house. He died in the Hattiesburg hospital several hours later. Twelve Ku Klux Klansmen were arrested. Dahmer, 58, was a prosperous landowner. He was awakened before dawn on January 10 and found his home and nearby store in flames. He exchanged shots with his attackers but died of burns several hours later at a Hattiesburg hospital. He had been former president of the Forrest County NAACP and active in voter registration campaigns. His wife Ellie says she still wakes up in the middle of the night and hears her daughter Betty screaming, 'We're not going to make it out of this house,' and it seems as though there is fire again everywhere.

J.M. Ingram, FBI agent from Jackson. identified a photograph of a 1963 automobile which was found near the scene of the firebombing. The car was said to belong to Travis Howard Giles, another of the defendants.

The Forrest County DA was James Finch. He and County Prosecutor James Dukes "wished to review al evidence before making any move in the case." LLC

LLC from 3/29/66: "Bowers, a neat, sandy-haired man who appears younger than his years, owns and operates an amusement company at Laurel." [the Sambo amusement company, which is not mentioned] He was quoted by Appell as saying, "If it is necessary to eliminate someone, it should be done with no malice, in [not continued in copies]

Laurel LC: "A county grand jury earlier this week indicted seven men on charges of arson and murder and five others on arson charges, including alleged Ku Klux Klan leader Sam Bowers." Bowers, his attorney Travis Buckley and Howard Travis Giles, remained in jail under \$10,000 bond on arson charges. All twelve men entered pleas of innocent to the various charges before Circuit Judge Stanton Hall. Seven of the men charged with both arson and murder in the case were being held without bond in jails here and in Jackson: those are Henry DeBoxtel, Cecil Sessum, Charles Clifford Wilson, Lester Franklin Thornton, James Franklin Lyons, William T. Smith and

Charles Richard Noble. All men charges were reportedly members of the militant White Knights of the Ku Klux Klan.

The 1965 HUAC hearings described the White Knights as the "meanest" of the klan groups, and principal suspects in the Neshoba killings. Sam Holloway Bowers, Jr., "dapper Laurel vending machine company operator," identified as White Knights imperial wizard, was indicted on federal charges in connection with both the Neshoba and the Dahmer slayings. He was one of the seven men convicted by a federal jury in Neshoba case.

LLC: "Bowers, Devours Nix, Cecil Victor Sessum, Billy Roy Pitts and attorney Travis Buckley were earlier charged with kidnapping Jack Watkins of Pascagoula and trying to force him to state that he beat Byrd to get the television shop owner to give the FBI a statement in the Dahmer case." In a surprise twist, Pitts pleaded guilty to the charge and was on probation after being sentenced to a five year prison term."

Bowers, Buckley, Nix, Byrd and Howard Travis Giles were charged with arson in Wednesday's indictments. Nix, Sessum, and DeBoxtel were charged with murder in addition to arson along with Charles Clifford Wilson, Lester Franklin Thornton, James Franklin Lyons, William T. Smith and Charles Richard Noble. [The article just beneath in the Laurel Leader Call: "Alfred Nobel, the Swedish Peace Prize donor, was the inventor of dynamite."]

Tuesday, March 29, 1966. Bowers, described by the FBI as armed and dangerous, was a fugitive from justice, after he slipped away from FBI agents in a Laurel cafe. LLC: "Bowers was recently described by investigators for the HUAC as Klan chieftain who exhorted his followers to keep a Bible handy and bear no malice when eliminating enemies." On Monday, the US Supreme Court unanimously upheld the use of the 19th law against 17 Mississippians charged in the Neshoba slayings. When Bowers appeared before the HUAC on February 1, chief investigator Donald T. Appell told of what he called the Laurel leader's order for the extermination of "The Goatee," otherwise known as Mickey Schwerner.

On Thursday, [date?], Bowers surrender to the Mississippi Highway Patrol. He had outfoxed FBI agents for three days. Bowers had given the FBI the slip by dodging out the back door of a cafe 12 hours before arrests began in the Dahmer case. Accompanied by his lawyers, Bowers gave himself up to Inspector Ernie Ray, who escorted him to the FBI office in Hattiesburg for photographing and fingerprinting. LLC: "Nattily dressed in a tan sports coat, khaki-colored trousers but without his usual sunglasses, Bowers balked at being handcuffed when taken from the FBI office to the US commissioner. He was told this was 'standard operating procedure.'"

Bowers claimed he was paraded in public "in order to discredit me and prejudice my case." The FBI said they simply had to get him to the commissioner's office. Bowers's attorneys stated that he had turned himself in to the FBI. When pressed for his whereabouts, they said he had not gone far away from the area, and yet the FBI "couldn't have found him in a month." LLC: "Bowers and the other 13 klansmen were charged with violating a post Civil War federal law prohibiting interference with any

individual or group seeking constitutional rights, and also with violating a section of the 1965 Voting Rights Act." He was free on \$25,000 bond.

Special FBI agent J.L. Martin testified at a preliminary hearing before a U.S. commissioner for 13 of 14 men arrested in connection with Dahmer's death on January 10. Martin said that Cecil Victor Sessum, exalted cyclops of Klavern No. 4 in Jones County, signed a statement to the effect that two or three weeks prior to the firebombing, he attended a meeting "in a swamp near Laurel." LLC: "Martin quoted Sessum as saying he heard Sam Bowers, Jr., the White Knights' imperial wizard say: 'Something has to be done with the Dahmer nigger.'" || ?

According to Martin, Sessum said in the statement that Bowers told the group that Dahmer was a "big NAACP Nigger," who getting too many Negroes to register to vote and that some 'good men' were needed to stop him. After the meeting, Sessum said a group of the klansmen made a dry run on Dahmer's home. Others involved with the dry run include Melvin Senentt, Martin Clifton, Eudell Lowe, Charles Lamar Lowe and William Ray Smith.

Another FBI agent testified that he found a halloween mask and a yellow hood near the Dahmer home following the firebombing. Loren Brooks of Hattiesburg was the first FBI agent to reach the scene of the murder. He told U.S. Commissioner Jack Pittman that he found the mask, the hood, a .22 caliber revolver and some spend shotgun hulls on the Dahmer property following the firebombing.

The FBI earlier displayed similar masks it had found along with a cache of guns and ammunition in the Laurel home of Sam Bowers.

It was Bowers who ordered that Dahmer's house be burned and that he be killed "if any way possible," according to T. Webber Rogers, who left the White Knights after the attack on Dahmer (Nelson, 28). "Rogers testified that when the Klansmen seemed slow to carry out Bowers' order, the imperial wizard would 'pound on the table and say he was tired of fooling around, something has got to be done about that damn nigger down south."
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This brought a massive response from the FBI. It was at this juncture that Tarrants showed up in Laurel. (JN, 29)

Conclusions: White four men went to jail for their role in the murder, 11 who were indicted escaped punishment altogether.