

## Vicksburg: Family Funeral

As spring life came to Mississippi in 1963, my father, now living in Memphis, was losing his own struggle for life. Jeannette and I had made some short visits to Memphis during the winter. There was very little conversation for any of us when we visited my parents; we could hardly talk about my new job at the black college. A few days after Easter my father suffered another heart attack. He was returned to the hospital, kept alive by the machinery of an intensive care unit. We rushed up to Memphis and waited. We could see my father only for brief moments during the day. His doctors had told me in January, after his initial massive heart attack, that there would likely be another attack, probably fatal, within a few months.

After several days at the hospital I decided I had to return to Mississippi for one afternoon. Tougaloo College was having a ceremonial affair to officially install Beittel as President (two years late) and to install me as the college chaplain. I returned for the program because I did not want to offend anyone at Tougaloo. I knew many students and teachers were just not sure they wanted any Mississippi white person on their campus, even one with a Movement "record." On a black campus this kind of academic festival was much more important than on a white campus. Not to be present, even with the most legitimate of reasons, would say to someone, or to many people, that their new chaplain, the white one, the Mississippi one, did not respect their traditions. My father's doctors told me his

condition, unchanged in several days, was unpredictable. So I drove back. My father died while I was at Tougaloo. Jeannette had stayed in Memphis and was with my mother at his bedside when death came.

I returned to Memphis and made the funeral arrangements. My friend from Corinth, the Rev. Sam Tomlinson, came over and gave me great help. After the services in Memphis we went to Vicksburg for the final services and burial. Here I saw the fullness of the hate that had been nurtured in Mississippi for so many years. Now it was not just a matter of people not being free to do good; now the hate-fear had overcome the good that was in many people. Some were not even free to be decent. As I saw the power of evil finally destroying even the things that were good about Southern life, the personal relationships, the manners, the grace, I knew again that our choice to work in the Freedom Movement was the struggle for life. It was the right choice; but the pain was more than I expected.

The evening before my father's funeral the family gathered at Fisher's Funeral Home. I had been to this place so many times. All the family funerals were held here. In the past it was always aunts and uncles. Now it was my father. The building was an antebellum home with quiet Victorian furnishings inside, and a massive, almost mournful oak tree outside, forming an arch through which the hearse and family cars passed. Everything was very familiar except the people. I knew them, had known them all my life, and they all knew me. I had changed but they had changed even more. The relatives seemed the same as always but the family friends and neighbors often showed the ravages of the shock, the

defeats, the fear and hatred of the civil rights turmoil in the state for the past few years.

To my amazement there were people who snubbed me, absolutely refused to speak to me. Standing in front of my father's bier there were a few who spoke to everyone in the family and then gave me a cold stare, the hate-look, and pointedly refused to shake my hand. Many must have blamed me for Daddy's death. Some even made comments, suggesting that I should go back north or similar thoughts. One lady, whom I had always known as the essence of gentility and graciousness, expressed her sympathy to my brother Alan, gave my mother a sympathetic embrace, spoke to my aunts, then walked up to me and said, quietly and firmly, with proper dignity, "I think what you are doing at that nigger college is terrible." Nothing else to me. Then she spoke to my Aunt Nell, "Aren't those flowers just lovely, especially those Easter lilies..." I just stared at the blanket of white lilies covering the coffin. Most people, of course, were proper. But nothing had impressed me like these few good people now ruled by their hate.

That night a storm blew into the city from out over the great bend in the river. It would have been a thrilling sight for me had I been child. My grandparents' home, from where I had watched so many river scenes, had been torn down. Jeannette and I stayed that night with old family friends, E. H. and "Aunt" Erie Puryear, in their house which was on the line of hills above the river. Before dawn Jeannette and I could hear the distant thunder, the steady movement towards us, and finally the wind and the rain. It was an odd kind of storm. It came with the violence of the summer thunderstorm; but the winds died away, the

lightening and thunder ceased, and the rain became a steady, gray, December like thing.

The funeral service was in Crawford Street Methodist Church, our family church, the church that taught me Sunday School lessons. This was one of the oldest churches in the state. In the yard of the church was the grave of a famous circuit rider, Tobias Gibson, from territorial days. An earlier church here had survived the War but was accidentally burned later. My Grandfather Tucker was on the building committee for the present structure. The funeral service was led by the Rev. Thomas Prewitt, a family friend and former minister, a man who first led me down the road to the ministry. My present path was far from anything he could understand but I was grateful to him for coming back to Vicksburg for this, and for all he had meant to me in my youth. It was impossible for any of my friends, black or white, in the college or the Movement to come but comfort came from the presence of old friends, clergy in the Mississippi Conference of the Methodist Church, like Hank Winstead and Nick Nicholson. It took courage as well as compassion to come.

The rain still fell as we left the church and drove through the old streets of Vicksburg, down the same way I had passed on so many other funerals. Opposite the church was an antebellum home used by officers during the War but where I had attended cub scout meetings in the home of Baker Dennis. I remembered that Christmas in a more recent war when his sister sang "Yesu Bambino," in this church, right after their brother was lost in action in Europe. And then I remembered wonderful Christmas times with my father. A

funeral at Easter was easier other seasons.

Across the street was another antebellum structure, the Convent and St. Francis Xavier school. A short distance beyond the church was Mercy Hospital, used by Confederates in the War; the City Hall, where my uncles helped manage the civic affairs for generations; the Corps of Engineers Building, where my father worked on the great plans to make humanity supreme over the river, to control the flood waters of the Mississippi. Soon we were at the Old Court House, its many columns and clock tower still crowning a hill that made it visible far out on the curves of the river, and a perfect target for Union gunboats; in later years a black sheriff was hurled to his death from the balcony (according to legends told me by black friends) and many years later my Grandfather had his offices there in his term as sheriff. Now it was a museum of Southern memorabilia with many of my "Uncle" Mack Moore's wonderful photographs of the great steamboats. Here I had worked as a teenager and as president of the "Junior" historical society, for my good conservative friend Eva Davis, the director, an unreconstructed Rebel. We drove on through the old streets paved with bricks, past Christ Episcopal Church, which still had fragments of Yankee shells in the walls. We passed a monument showing a fallen tree; the 1839 inscription stated it was given "...by a grateful citizenry in honor of Dr. Bodley, murdered by the gamblers..."

Beyond the old city was "Graveyard Road" and the gates to Cedarlawn Cemetery. This place, among the most beautiful cemeteries in this land, was a necropolis built on hills even more steep than in the city of Vicksburg. Our journey passed through the oldest

sections, with sometimes weathered stone angels, marble vaults, and many wrought iron gates and low fences. So many of the markers had crumbled; so many names were illegible. Then the great life size crucifix and the graves of the Sisters of Mercy, the Catholic nuns who had nursed the Confederate and civilian casualties of the Yankees in the War, and later nuns who had taught so many of my friends and cousins. Next was the Confederate grave sites, mostly unknown soldiers, placed here rather than with the Union dead in the National Cemetery. Now the rains had paused. The Tucker family plot was at one of the highest points in the cemetery; the bluffs beyond these graves reached up to the Confederate trenches on the old battlefield. Here we buried my father.

Nearby were the graves of my mother's parents: my grandmother, born during the Reconstruction, and a dear memory of my childhood, the loving old lady who still always wore floor length dresses; my grandfather, born in the days of the Old South, to a slave-holding family, dead two years before my birth but in some ways a dominant influence on my life as everyone on the family still talked of his character, his deeds, his life; his distinguished face hung as a portrait in all the relatives' homes. I had often heard the story of his death and his funeral, from the old home, with crowds of blacks (who remembered his kindness, and his defiance of the Klan to save a black woman accused of killing a white man) standing under the great oaks in the front yard, singing hymns and spirituals as his casket was carried out. My mother's family were those who had always been the good citizens and leaders in the South. They had been in Mississippi since Spanish times, coming

from lines in South Carolina, Virginia, and Bermuda. My great grandfather Tucker at the Oak Ridge plantation out in Warren County had only a small number of slaves. But his father, early settler in Madison County soon after the land was stolen from the Choctaws, was a planter on the grand scale with many slaves.

My father's family was more from the yeoman line of the South. His parents had come to the funeral from their home in the northwest corner of Louisiana, near Texas, Arkansas, and Oklahoma. His father and mother both had the tall, gray, gaunt look of the sturdy people of Appalachia. They knew the struggles of those who never quite find all the riches of the promised land. My father was born in Oklahoma, but his father was not one of those who got the riches in that land grab. The family moved back and forth between this last frontier and the early frontier of West Virginia and Ohio. They finally settled in Oil City, Louisiana, to do the hard labor of the oil fields there and in nearby Texas in another boom time when a few struck it rich and most did not. I remembered my confusion as a child visiting them and my father having to answer my questions about a working oil pump in the yard next to the outhouse. Those who owned the land did not own the mineral rights. I had insisted to Daddy that with oil in the ground my grandparents were too rich to have an outhouse. Then he explained things to me. I had never been able to explain my work for Civil Rights to him. He died believing Christians should treat blacks with kindness, that segregation could never be changed, that I might be a misguided idealist Communist dupe.

As I stood there by the open grave, supporting my grandmother from Louisiana, I

realized that both family lines represented the South and America. Strong people, good people, but never free to do good, hardly the ruling capitalist class of America, but certainly WASPS. These people had made America; they had come from Britain, Scotland, Ireland, and France, to settle the coast lands, the mountains, and the frontiers. They, and their slaves, had produced much of the wealth that built New England industry and American capitalism. Their problems, their failures, their racism was a visible thing, but they shared this blame and responsibility with all America.

Prayers, Psalms, "ashes to ashes, dust to dust... Amen." The service concluded. As we drove down the hills from the cemetery the rains began again, softly, slowly.