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Is the South Still Gothic?

Charles Marsh Unmasks the Ku Klux Klan

Tony Earley Hunts Ghosts in New Orleans

Tim McLaurin Goes on the Road with a Snake Show

Harry Crews Drives Through a Wild Hurricane

(Canada $6.25)

rendezvous with THE WIZARD

by Charles Marsh

I am not prepared for the ghost town Laurel has become. When I moved away in 1973, thirty thousand people lived here—almost twice the number that live here now. A historic district of turn-of-the-century mansions, cobbled brick streets, gas lamps, and sprawling oak trees showcased a town thriving from a petroleum and timber boom.

The historic district remains, but "for sale" signs and empty houses tell of the past decade's economic malaise. An ambitious urban renewal program went bankrupt in the late 1970s, leaving behind blocks of vacated department stores and offices. The Masonite plant was downsized to bare-bones operations; oil wells dried up; petroleum prices plummeted.

As I pull into Laurel I decide to look for Sam Bowers's place before settling into my temporary residence. I pass semi-abandoned housing projects and ruined buildings plastered over with posters of evangelists and wrestlers; I pass a bar operating out of a former snow-cone stand; a defunct car wash; people sitting on porches of shotgun houses in the hot sun; littered fields; a Pentecostal church.

And, finally, Bowers's place comes into view. I pull up to the curb in front of a dilapidated wood-frame building where Bowers has worked and lived for more than thirty years. I stare at the front door, which is massive. It must be eight feet high and four feet wide. The only windows in the front of the building are small and high up, and from the street, I can see stacks of yellowed papers and old books in their frames.

I knock on the door and it opens.

"Is Mr. Bowers here?" I ask.

The door slams in my face.

When my family moved to Mississippi in 1967, Bowers had recently been reindicted by a Jackson grand jury for conspiracy charges in the 1964 killings of Civil Rights workers James Chaney, Mickey Schwerner, and Andrew Goodman. At the same time, Bowers was also awaiting trial for the 1966 murder of the NAACP leader Vernon Dahmer. Despite all this, he wasn't much worried about the outcome. "A jury would not dare convict a white man for killing a nigger in Mississippi," he boasted openly. He kept to a familiar routine. On many nights, you could find him sitting at the counter of the Admiral Benbow coffee shop, talking with fellow members of the Ku Klux Klan. He collected firearms and ammunition. He ran a pinball machine operation called the Sambo Amusement Company. He taught Sunday school at the tiny Hillcrest Baptist Church on the east side of town. And he waged war against blacks, Jews, liberal whites—anyone who threatened the sovereignty of his Mississippi.

In fact, in 1965 and 1966, the Klan struck more than fifty times in the Laurel area alone (though Bowers was not necessarily involved in all of these). There were cross burnings, house bombings, drive-by shootings, store burnings, and repeated attacks on a local Civil Rights organization that finally closed its doors in defeat.

Although Bowers had been a member of the Mississippi chapter of the Original Knights of the Ku Klux Klan of Louisiana, he and two hundred other former members christened a new, highly secretive organization called the White Knights of the Ku Klux Klan of Mississippi on February 15, 1964. Bowers was named Imperial Wizard. It was their intent that the new Klan would be more responsive to the upcoming Summer Project, a movement created by a group of tenacious Civil Rights organizations as a means of "breaking the iceberg" of Mississippi segregation. Since the fall of 1963, state newspapers, political leaders, and police officials had excitedly warned the public of the "thousands" of Northern liberal students (the actual number would be just around one thousand) who, along with black activists, would "invade" the state on a scale the South had not experienced since Sherman.

By the end of the long, hot summer, the membership in the White Knights had grown to six thousand.

27 years after being convicted for his role in the infamous murders of 3 Civil Rights workers, Sam Bowers, former Imperial Wizard of the Ku Klux Klan, explains, in the only interview he has ever granted, why he is a man of God.

I knock again, and continue knocking. No answer. I write a note: "Mr. Bowers, you may recall I wrote you last fall. I'm in Laurel until the end of the month. I hope we can talk." I sign my name and hesitantly put down my phone number.

The previous fall I had written Bowers a letter requesting an interview with him. I was at work on a book, I told him, and wanted to write a chapter about how his theological views shaped his Klan militancy. I had grown up in Laurel, I said, and my father was a Southern Baptist preacher.

When he did not reply to my letter, I called the Sambo Amusement Company. No one answered. I called five, ten, twenty times, always getting the same recorded message. So I finally called Devours Nix, a close friend of Bowers who was also indicted in the firebombing death of Vernon Dahmer, and whom the *The Ku Klux Klan: An Encyclopedia* claims was once investigated for possible involvement in the murder of Martin Luther King, Jr. I got Nix on the first try. He told me Bowers had received my let-

ter, but that, of course, I must be aware that Bowers has never granted an interview. Nix told me that just the day before a writer from *The New Yorker* had called him—Devours Nix—only to be turned away like all the others. But Sam had taken an interest in my letter.

"Do you think Mr. Bowers and I can talk?" I asked.

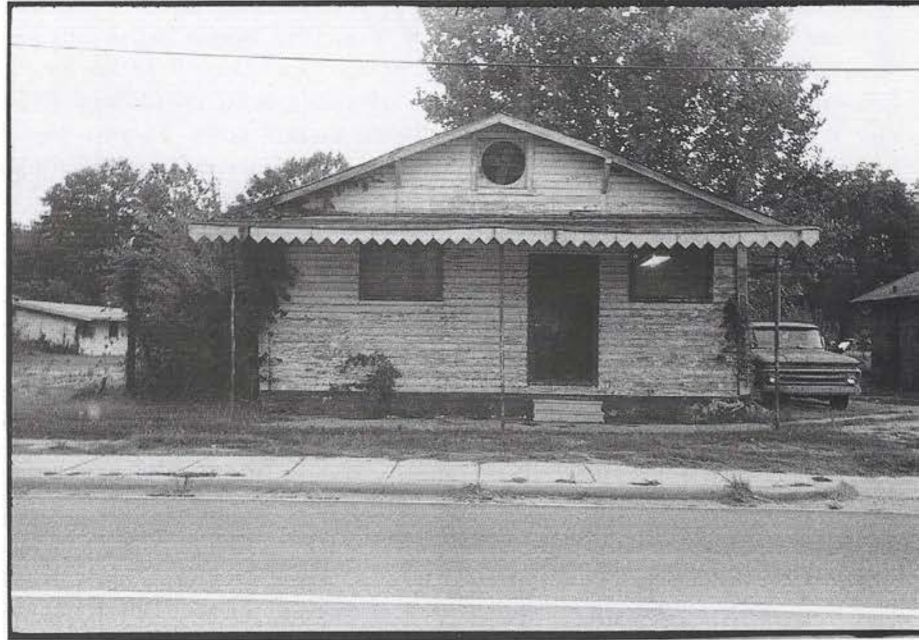
"Not now, as I said, but I would certainly not rule it out in the future," Nix responded.

He told me to wait patiently for a reply, which Sam would write on his own good time.

A month later a bulging envelope arrived at my office with "Sam H. Bowers, Jr." typed in the return address. Bowers began the letter by saying, "On the basis of several casual approaches (by you) which were unsolicited (by me) as to my personal-public 'theological views' (your phrase) which purport to be incorporated into some 'new' literary effort [*not* my phrase] (by you), I can only offer the following fractional (and factional) response."

After six single-spaced pages of a nonstop harangue, he concluded on the following note:

> Should this herein polemic prove to be creatively stimulating to your individual proprietary thought processes: In a genuinely non-cannibalistic and non-exploitative way toward me, Mr. Marsh, you may, later, wish to submit something of a comprehensive outline of your prospective literary work. But, I warn you, sir, I do not operate a "school for casual political theologians," and, while my personal experience is some 50 years long, and my historical-traditional perspective is some 6000 years long, my patience is rather thin (with instant-abstract .033 nanosecond questioning approaches). I assume that you are "supposed" to have the kind of "background," already, which would "qualify" you for "prime time" in those vitally significant, human interactive area(s) of public power metaphysics. Thus, I am not going "to write your book for you," nor, to presume, nor attempt "to teach you how to think," nor, "to try your polemical advocacy public case for you." Also, I have become rather "bored": with the contemporary efforts of Pagan Academic Savants Heathen Media hysterics: In their published efforts to: Twist my meanings, impugn my motives, ridicule my patriotism, correct my attitudes, define my personality and instruct my behavior.



The Sambo Amusement Company in Laurel, Mississippi. Photo by Tom Rankin.

I guessed that meant no interviews.

I wrote Bowers back asking a few background questions but he did not reply.

Thus, here I am in Laurel, living for the month of August in a house a few miles away from the Sambo Amusement Company. After I install an air conditioner in the window of my temporary home, I unpack my files on Bowers and spread them on the floor around the desk of my new office. I am soon surrounded by photographs of church fires, unearthed corpses, praying Klansmen, weeping mothers.

The next morning after calling Bowers and getting his answering machine again, I decide to stop by his place on my way to Jackson. I pull a copy of my book out of a box and tuck it into my briefcase. No one answers my repeated knocks at the Sambo Amusement Company. In a grandiose gesture, I lean my book against the front door, setting an inescapable trap: an academic monograph on the German resistance activist and theologian Dietrich Bonhoeffer will collapse onto the feet of the first person who opens the door. I scribble a note telling Bowers I am interested in his comments, tape it to the door, and leave town.

When I return home at mid-morning the next day, the telephone is ringing. Ken Dean is calling from Hattiesburg. In the mid-1960s Dean ran the progressive Mississippi Council on Human Relations. Though he had long since moved to Rochester, New York, to pastor an American Baptist church, he met Sam Bowers in Jackson a few years ago at a funeral of an old Klansman. (Dean considers it a pastoral duty to befriend aging racists, just as he had once befriended blacks in the Jim Crow South.) The two men immediately discovered that they shared several interests: an abhorrence of federal agencies, a disillusion with mass social movements, and a fascination with Adolf Hitler. Of course, none of this explains why Dean is calling me from Hattiesburg.

"This is a pleasant surprise," I tell Dean.

"The Lord works in mysterious ways," he replies.

In the early hours before daybreak on January 10, 1966, Klansmen drove two automobiles onto Vernon Dahmer's property and tossed Molotov cocktails into the windows of his home. As flames engulfed the house, Klansmen opened fire on the windows and the porch where Dahmer stood shooting back with his shotgun. Dahmer's shots missed their targets, although a Klansman accidentally blasted a hole in the tire of the other car, forcing the car to be abandoned. Mrs. Dahmer and the children escaped the burning house, but Dahmer inhaled what would prove to be fatal lungfuls

of smoke and flame—although he managed to drive his family to a hospital in Hattiesburg before collapsing. A few hours before his death the next morning, he told a friend, "People who don't vote are deadbeats on the state. I figure a man needs to do his own thinking. What happened to us can happen to anybody, white or black. At one time I didn't think so, but I have changed my mind."

The Dahmer killing marked a new stage in the FBI involvement in Civil Rights. Throughout the early 1960s and during the Mississippi Summer Project of 1964, the FBI too often played softball with the Klan. To local black people and Civil Rights activists who complained that white terrorists seemed immune from prosecution, the FBI's response was mantra-like: "We are an investigative not a law-enforcing agency." But all this changed in early 1966 when white leaders and law enforcement officials in Jones and Forrest counties gave the FBI carte blanche to wipe out the White Knights by any means necessary.

Still, it would take more than a year of intense heat to finally break the solidarity of the White Knights. In late September of 1967, a Klansman named Billy Roy Pitts, who had been arrested with thirteen others in March of 1966, called the FBI office in Jackson and said he wanted to talk about the Dahmer murder. At the conclusion of an all-night meeting with two FBI agents, Pitts signed a lumbering statement against Sam Bowers which confirmed allegations made the previous year by Klansman Cecil Sessums (who later withdrew his statements, claiming FBI harassment) that Bowers had orchestrated the killing. "Sam Bowers and Devours Nix were close by in the event that anything went wrong," Pitts wrote. At the same time, Pitts's statement also illustrated Bowers's command of the White Knights. In one section he stated, "On more than one occasion since the Dahmer burning Sam Bowers has personally cautioned me to keep my mouth shut and stated that if any member of the group ever dealt with the government, they would get the hell beat out of them. Bowers also told me that if anyone pimped on the deal, the pimp would hang with the others." Pitts's testimony led to the first federal trial of Bowers and the White Knights of the Ku Klux Klan.

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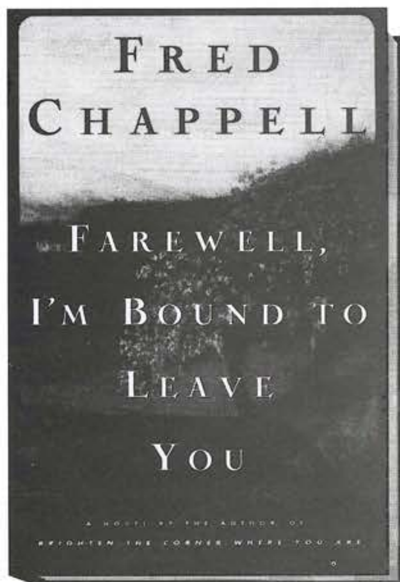

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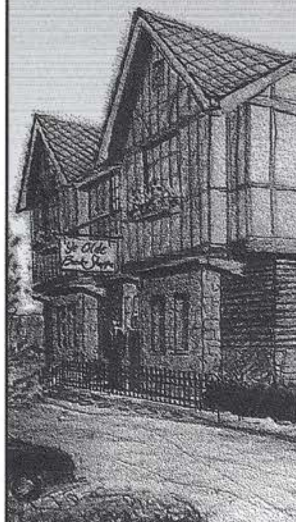

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Bowers eventually stood trial four times for the Dahmer murder. They all ended in mistrials or hung juries. Forrest County prosecutors did, however, hand out convictions, including three life sentences, to four other members of the White Knights.

Bowers's luck did not continue in his trial for the murders of Chaney, Goodman, and Schwerner. In 1967, he was sentenced to ten years in federal prison for "conspiracy to violate their civil rights." The decision marked the first time a Mississippi jury had convicted members of the Klan for crimes against Civil Rights workers. Although the Hattiesburg District Attorney's office is once again considering retrying Bowers for the Dahmer murder, little evidence remains from previous trials. Nikki Davis Maute, who has ably covered the story for *The Hattiesburg American,* has reported that the court transcripts from the mistrials, as well as files of the former D.A. Jim Dukes, have been lost.

After serving seven years of his sentence at McNeil Island Federal Penitentiary in Washington state, Bowers returned to Laurel in 1976. Now seventy-two years old, he lives a reclusive life, apparently content with his theology and philosophy books, a few guarded friendships, his men's Bible class, and a passion for race cars. Bowers likes reporters and writers about as much as he liked the thousand activists who rolled in from the North in the summer of 1964. Such phrases as, "Mr. Bowers does not grant interviews," (*The New York Times*) and, "He still goes to extraordinary lengths to avoid reporters, whom he openly despises," (*The Hattiesburg American*) are as familiar in the literature as descriptions of the "mad gleam in his eyes," (Jack Nelson) and his interest in the metaphysics of Patrick Swayze's movie *Point Break* (*The Clarion-Ledger*).

Ken Dean tells me he is calling me from his mother-in-law's house, where he is coordinating an estate sale for the family. He also tells me he talked to Sam this morning on the phone. Dean wants to talk to me in person.

I arrive at his house in Hattiesburg thirty minutes later. The tall, barrel-chested minister is standing in the front yard, wearing khaki shorts and a polo shirt. He wants to tell me a few observations Sam had about my

book. He tells me that Sam had read it the night before and found it to be a "scholarly, esoteric, and often engaging treatment of the subject." I smile and listen, and try not to let on how bizarre I find this.

He invites me inside the small wood-frame house. A single-file line of shoppers is formed outside the front door. He leads me through the living room and kitchen and onto a patio in the backyard. He gestures for me to take a seat in a folding chair, and proceeds to ask me a string of questions. He asks me about the new book I am researching, about my family, my parents, my grandparents. He asks how many brothers and sisters my wife has, how many I have. When I ask why he wants to know all this, he says, "I'm just curious," and hands me a wad of cash. For the next hour I am the cashier for the estate sale.

Later, at lunch at a Pizza Hut, Dean offers his opinion on Bowers. "In the most radical sense, Sam is a believer in the total sovereignty of God." This accounts for a large part of Bowers's antisocial behavior, he adds without explanation. Dean attests strongly to Bowers as a tragic figure; his militant vocation was "born of a degree of hurt or oppression" much more than of evil. In short, Dean has come to see Bowers as a remarkable person, indeed a man for whom he has great admiration.

"Admiration?" I ask.

"Admiration."

When we return to the house, two men from a moving company are waiting to be paid for the morning's work. Dean writes them a check and then grabs a handful of cash from the cigar box I had used for the estate sale. He hands each of them a ten dollar bill; shocked, they thank him with big grins. Then he hands each of them another ten, and then another, and another, each bill waved through the air in a dramatic arch, until both men receive sixty-dollar tips. They leave speechless.

Whatever doubts I have that Dean is running interference for Bowers vanish as I am walking to my car after saying good-bye. For some reason, I turn around and look back into the front yard. On the side driveway, Dean is standing beside a pickup truck with a camcorder propped on his shoulder, videotaping me.

The next day, I call the Sambo Amusement Company to leave Bowers the message that I have seen Dean—as if he did not already know. I am expecting the recorded message. When someone answers, I am so disconcerted that I abruptly hang up. I regroup and call again minutes later. A person who I presume is Robert Larson, Bowers's roommate and business partner since 1946, answers the phone.

"Is this Mr. Larson?" I ask.

"No, this is Mr. Bowers."

I tell him my name and stutter out, "What a surprise. I'm glad to finally reach you in person. I hope you're doing well today. I'm in town for a while—it's so good to be back in good old Laurel. I'd appreciate the chance to talk to you about my research."

His voice seems tired.

"I have given this matter some thought, Mr. Marsh, and it will not be possible to visit with you. I have come to the conclusion that there is simply not enough common ground between us to warrant any discussion. I apologize."

I explain that we both have an interest in theology and philosophy, that I am a native Southerner, that we are both Baptists. I am walking on thin ice.

He repeats that our backgrounds render any common ground impossible.

I ask him what exactly about my background he has in mind.

He says it isn't so much my background as the fact that I have forsaken my background.

"I recall you said that in your letter," I reply, "but if the two of us could talk, you might see this is not the case. I consider myself an orthodox Christian, and have always." I grovel on like this until he interrupts me.

"Mr. Marsh, I cannot understand why you're so influenced by the pagan media and academic circus."

I suddenly understand.

"You're referring to Jack Nelson's book, aren't you?"

"Mr. Marsh, I was mistaken to think Jack Nelson was at least an honest whore who had become somewhat innocently trapped into working with the media brothel. I was mistaken, and perhaps sinful, to think that contacts with him might help communicate my ideas more effectively."

While the Pulitzer-prize winning journalist Jack Nelson was writing his book *Terror in the Night: The Klan's Campaign Against the Jews,* Bowers had agreed to the possibility of an interview if Nelson would find a publisher for the manuscripts on political philosophy Bowers had begun in prison. For a while, Bowers believed he had made an offer that could not be refused. When Nelson did refuse, Bowers was disappointed. And when the Nelson book appeared in 1993, with a devastating portrait of Bowers's terrorism against Jews in the years following the 1964 Freedom Summer, Bowers was enraged.

I found Nelson's book impossible to put down, but I try to assure Bowers that I want only to talk about his theological ideas—Jack

Brown Brothers, N. Y.

THE RIDE OF THE KLANSMEN

In 1866, a secret society known as the Ku Klux Klan was founded to protect weak, innocent, and defenseless people and to restore to the white men the political control of the South. These Klansmen are on their way to the home of a dishonest officeholder to frighten him into giving up his position.

Page 194 of *The History of Mississippi,* a 1935 textbook that is "dedicated to the school children of Mississippi."

Nelson's book has nothing to do with my wish to interview him.

"Well, there's really nothing unique about my ideas," Bowers replies. "I'm a Pauline, Galilean, Calvinist, reformed Lutheran Christian. I believe that the empirical resurrection of Jesus Christ is the one single and central fact of manifested history. But you see, Mr. Marsh, I cannot understand how you can claim to be a follower of the Galilean and still work in the pagan academy."

He always returns to this point.

I tell Bowers that I am troubled by some of what passes for intellectual inquiry in the academy, though I consider it more important to work within the academy than to flee from it.

"I don't consider myself fleeing from pagan culture. I think it's important to attack it."

Bowers quickly corrects me. "I don't consider myself fleeing from pagan culture. I think it's important to attack it."

His voice gains energy with those last words—spoken in a loud, staccato voice.

"Do you think attack and reform have to be mutually exclusive?" I ask.

"Absolutely."

I want to know what he considers the best form of attack, but he says he has to get off the phone. Before he hangs up, he says, "Some of the things you say, Mr. Marsh, make me want to rethink this whole matter. I will be in touch with you."

Shortly after my wife and children arrive in Laurel, I call Charles Pickering, an old friend of the family who is now a federal judge. I had learned that when George Bush nominated Mr. Pickering for the federal judiciary of South Mississippi, the Dahmer family had written a letter of support. I ask him if we can come for a visit. We set a date for an afternoon of fishing and an evening cookout at his thousand-acre farm. I tell him I want to talk about Bowers; he laughs and says I can come on out now if I want. He is free for the day. We can talk in his home office.

Pickering remembers the Dahmer case well. He says he was called by Sam Bowers's defense attorney to answer three questions at the trial. The questioning proceeded as follows:

Defense: "Do you know of Sam Bowers's reputation in the community?"

Pickering: "Yes."

Defense: "Is it good or bad?"

Pickering: "It's bad."

Defense: "Do you know that Sam Bowers teaches Sunday school?"

Pickering: "Yes."

Defense: "Thank you. That will be all."

Although being tried in South Mississippi in 1968 for killing black people might get a person into some sort of legal mess, any doubt about his involvement in Sunday school was *really* serious business. Bowers was freed on a hung jury. Still, Pickering's testimony earned him the praise of the black community and the wrath of the Klan.

As I am leaving, Judge Pickering asks if I remember when he used to live behind the church. His house was across the street from a field where I played football on Wednesday nights before prayer meeting. Bowers spent a lot of time at the house next door, he tells me. He used to fix up old cars with a man who lived there. I suddenly remember warm fall afternoons, with my father playing quarterback for both sides, his rolled-up shirt drenched with sweat, his wild-eyed zeal for complex pass patterns lost on the pubescent boys. I remember the men who gathered around beat up cars beside the curb, laughing and smoking cigarettes.

Several weeks into August, I begin to have doubts about getting to Bowers. A week goes by and no progress is made. His van is nowhere to be found. I seek him out in a few places I hear he frequents, but no luck. I decide to spend a few days on the road. I travel to Neshoba County with a Civil Rights veteran who'd been good friends with Mickey Schwerner and his wife Rita. I go to Jackson to work in libraries and archives and talk to numerous Movement people. Back in Laurel, I have lunch with my junior high school coach, take my children swimming at the country club pool, and look up old friends.

Towards the end of the week, I decide to pay another visit to the Sambo Amusement Company. No one answers my knocks at the door, so I walk around the circumference of the property. Inside the high chain-link fence that surrounds the building are a few demolished cars and pickups and, beneath a dead pecan tree, a pile of scrap metal. I walk down the street. I had not noticed before the two shops next to the Sambo Amusement Company. The first is a small grocery store, with a few cans stacked on shelves and a large refrigerator filled with milk, sodas, and beer. In the next window I see a red, yellow, and green flag hung high on an inside wall. I walk inside an African-American bookstore and discover a large selection of Civil Rights books. I ask the friendly owner if he does a good business. Not really, he says. I ask him if he knows who his neighbor is. He smiles and rolls his eyes. I pick up an armful of books—James Cone's *Martin and Malcolm*, Kenneth O'Reilly's *Racial Matters*, and James Forman's *The Making of Black Revolutionaries*—and give the man my credit card. What a town.

On the Saturday before my last week in Laurel, I call Bowers. I want to tell him I am planning to attend his Sunday school class the next morning at Hillcrest Baptist Church. I also want him to know that I am leaving soon and I am still eager to talk.

Bowers answers the phone. He sighs when he hears my voice and he seems annoyed that I called. I ask him if he's come to a decision about the interview. He says some days he thinks he'll do it; other days, he won't. He says he still can not understand why I want to talk to him.

I state the reasons again: I am interested in his religious views. I tell him again that I grew up in Laurel, son of a Southern Baptist preacher, fifth-generation Mississippian, that I came of age amidst the social conflict of the 1960s, that I am interested in understanding the religious character of that conflict, and so on.

Then there is a silence. For a moment, I think the line has gone dead.

"Mr. Bowers?"

He sighs again. "As I said, Mr. Marsh, I have not entirely ruled out the possibility of a meeting with you. However, I need you to do something for me."

You name it, I think.

"I need you to write down on a piece of paper why, of all the native Mississippi pinball machine operators in Jones County, Sam Holloway Bowers, Jr. is so important to your research."

I laugh loudly, nervously. He continues.

"You bring this with you tomorrow night to an eating establishment by the name of Uncle Roy Strick's Home Cookin' and Bar-B-Q. There's a private dining room in the back where I take my meals. I'll be waiting for you at six o'clock."

"Very good, Mr. Bowers, I look forward to seeing you then."

I hang up the phone. My wife has been standing in the doorway, listening to the conversation. I walk past her into the kitchen, grab my wallet and car keys from the counter, and tell her the news; an interview with Sam Bowers tomorrow night.

"Where are you going?" she asks.

"To buy some cigarettes," I answer. My first pack in years.

When I return, I type out the following:

Having already written numerous descriptions in various correspondences regarding my theological and spiritual purposes at hand, and believing that further clarification can best be made in conversation, I turn to The Epistle to the Ephesians where Paul writes:

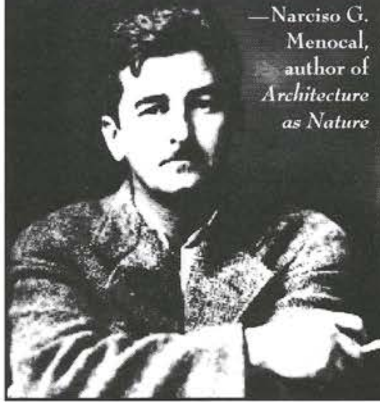
"Now therefore ye are no more strangers and foreigners, but fellow citizens with the saints, and of the household of God; And are built upon the foundation of the apostles and prophets, Jesus Christ himself being the chief corner stone;

"In whom all the building fitly framed together groweth unto an holy temple in the Lord:

"In whom ye also are builded together for an habitation of God through the Spirit."

I'm not sure what this has to do with Bowers, but I'm desperate.

The restaurant actually goes by two different names: Uncle Roy Strick's Home-Cookin' and Bar-B-Q, and Strick's. I drive by it several times and am beginning to think Bowers is playing a little game on a pest that wouldn't leave until I realize that a concrete



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Kosciusko, Mississippi 39090
BED AND BREAKFAST
Lunch served
Monday through Friday
11:30 until 1:30
Phone 601/289-5086 for reservations
800-379-5086
Antiques

block addition to a Citgo filling station is the address. I enter the front door. A woman in a skintight t-shirt stands behind a large counter and stares at me. To the left of the counter is a buffet of meat and vegetables simmering in metal pans; behind the buffet is a large plate glass window with a view of the garage. I tell the woman who I'm looking for and she points to a door. I open the door and walk down a dark hall, pointing my fingers outward to keep from bumping into the wall. When I feel another door, I open it and find myself in a small banquet room with Masonite siding, lowered blinds, and a row of picnic tables.

Bowers sits with his back to me, reading a newspaper. There is no one else in the room. He turns around to greet me as I approach the table. He nods his head and tells me to have a seat. He appears much younger than his years. A tall, slender man with high cheekbones, his gray hair is carefully combed back in the same swooping style he wore thirty years ago.

He is wearing a navy pinstripe suit, a blue pinstriped shirt, a blue and red striped tie, and white suspenders. He also wears a wide, brown belt with a large buckle in the shape of Mickey Mouse. He wears white pearl cuff links with reliefs of the waving Mickey in the center. He also wears a Mickey Mouse watch. On the lapel of his jacket is a small silver fish, the symbol of the risen Jesus.

A copy of the *The Clarion-Ledger* rests in his lap. Days earlier the paper ran a front-page story on Bowers, making a strong case that he should be brought back to trial for the Vernon Dahmer killing. The Jackson paper has already been instrumental in winning a new trial for the murderer of Civil Rights leader Medgar Evers. Still, the highly celebrated conviction of Byron de la Beckwith—a mean, stupid man who always tried a little too hard to impress Sam Bowers—would look like a sideshow were the former Imperial Wizard retried.

I tell Bowers that my grandfather, who covered Mississippi politics in the 1960s for an out-of-state paper, always referred to the Jackson press as the "Glaring Error." He smiles and asks me if I'd like some iced tea.

A man wearing a baseball cap opens a swinging door and appears with two glasses on a tray. Bowers introduces me as a "theologian from Maryland." I shake hands with the man and we stare at each other in silence.

I produce my "Brief Statement," but Bowers waves it off.

"I've agreed to talk to you about this work you're doing even though I still cannot understand it. But the first thing you should know is that I have total hatred for the academy and the pagan media. I hope and pray that both implode on the force of their own corruption and stagnation. I have always hoped and prayed for this to happen."

I make a mental note of the exit door several tables behind me and start to ask a question, but he interrupts.

"You seem to take quite a lot of interest in the 1960s. Well, today, just like then, we need people who will offer their physical lives in opposition to these idols, to attack the establishment at the very center of its power and prestige. We need to implement concrete actions which enable us to once again see America as the fulfillment of the Abrahamic promise."

I ask him who is doing this kind of work today.

He mentions a number of right-wing groups like the National Alliance and Posse Comitatus; he mentions Andrew Macdonald and his dark novel, *The Turner Diaries* (which seems to turn up in the mountain huts and fallout shelters of every bomb and militia freak in the nation).

Bowers assumes a professorial demeanor. "Macdonald's book proposes that a covert system of enclaves be established for the purpose of training and coordinating an invisible underground army to attack and destroy all remnants of our constitutional government. They would have us launch nuclear missiles on the Russians so that we in turn would be annihilated."

Then: "I surely do not feel compelled to avoid personal injury for the sake of attacking the establishment."

Then: "But unlike *The Turner Diaries*, I want to see the constitution preserved. In fact, you may know I began my own literary work twenty-five years ago after I observed Richard Nixon's impeachment. I had a guilty conscience watching Nixon get torn to pieces by anarchists, communists, and the demagogues of the Democratic Party. These reprobates were ripping him to shreds. I thought I should get off of my stinking ass and put my gifts to work, and if I pursued the task well,

I could emasculate these guys.

"My writing was stimulated, I should say, by my mother's high standards for learning. My mother was a very educated and disciplined person; she would not allow an ungrammatical word to pass from my mouth without punishment."

His eyes narrow.

"So much has been said about me that's untrue."

He seems agitated now. He stirs in his chair and grimaces toward the ceiling.

"By the age of fifteen, I was deeply suspicious of everyone in authority. I'm not sure why, but I felt the degeneracy of the adult world with great intensity. I was a hyper child. I didn't want to grow up. It always seemed like those in authority were bent on making impositions on me, and I despised them for it."

After his parents divorced in 1938, Bowers bounced around from school to school before dropping out of high school to join the Navy.

But now his anger vanishes, giving way to a loud belly laugh—his whole face spreads into a comically wide country grin—and his shrieking voice changes to a friendly, expansive sort of hillbilly twang.

"I love to see children throw tantrums," Bowers says. "I was recently having dinner with a friend of mine whose granddaughter started to feel ignored. So she sassed her grandmom, and was quickly reproved by a slap on the hand. That little girl turned beet red with anger, and ran over to a wall and began pounding and kicking it with all her might."

Bowers demonstrates this by getting out of his chair and slapping his hands against the flimsy Masonite paneling.

"I just loved watching that," he says, as his eyes slowly grow sorrowful and distant. He sits back down.

"You know, Jesus prefers the little ones, which is why we should go slow on beating children."

His thoughts drift. "I've got tapes going on in my head that are forty or fifty years old. Maybe that's just senility. I sometimes forget certain periods of my life, and remember others with total clarity."

He talks until late Sunday night, while I pause from my writing only to ask questions. He speaks eloquently of his grandfather, E.J. Bowers, a U.S. congressman from Mississippi, whom he worshiped. He opines on the doctrine of predestination: "I am a stern believer in the notion. People are not simply spiritually, but also genetically, predetermined." He talks about his impressions after leaving prison in 1976: "My first experience was that the outside world was full of filth. In prison, we never had any problem with garbage, but outside was a different story."

[UPI/CORBIS-BETTMANN]

Sam Bowers on his way to an FBI office in 1966 to answer questions about the murder of Vernon Dahmer.

My questions range from the philosophical to the personal, but carefully approach the historical. For, notwithstanding my repeated caveats, I do want to know why he desired to have decent people killed in the name of God.

When I finally ask him directly about his crimes, he speaks cautiously, "Look, there are two really powerful figures in the world: the priest and the preacher. I think I came here as a priest, though not a preacher. A priest is interested in visible, public power operations; this is what makes him powerful like a warrior. A preacher is an evangelist; he will tell people what to do. But the priest will arrange the means and operations to implement this into concrete action."

He reaches his arms across the table and looks directly in my eyes.

"When the priest sees the heretic, he can do only one thing: he eliminates him."

With that, he sighs, "I have no more to say now about my so called anti-Civil Rights ideas."

"Did your views change in prison?" I ask.

"The only thing that happened to me at McNeil Island was that information was gained and then applied to my theological and political ideas. I've been about this task for a long time."

He rubs his forehead with the tips of his fingers. "Let me tell you a story," he says, "and then I must turn in for the night.

I've always asked myself the question, 'Who am I? What am I doing here? What is the world all about? What is my position within in it?' On Easter Sunday 1972, I had an experience at McNeil Island that put that question into a new perspective for me. At the time, I was in my second year of prison. As I had done every Easter season since my baptism, I was preparing myself for Resurrection Sunday with calculated devotion and seriousness. Although I felt myself to be spiritually inadequate much of the year, Easter always inspired me towards a time of earnestness and tranquility.

"On Good Friday of that year I sat at my desk in the prison's education department reading through some back issues of a news magazine. An article about a theological controversy caught my attention. The focus of the piece was the decision of a Christian college to fire one of its faculty members who had declared atheist ideas in the classroom. The heretic had petitioned the American Association of University Professors to have the school discredited institutionally, claiming that his civil liberties were being violated by the institution. The magazine seemed predictably biased in favor of the plaintiff's complaints. Shortly after finishing the story, I was taken back to my cell for afternoon lockup. Resting in my bunk before supper, my mind began to reel as I thought aboutthe situation: here was the

church—my church—seeking to purify itself from heretical filth, but instead finding itself under attack by an atheist and heathen media. I began to be filled with rage. *Rage, rage, rage.* And I thought: 'Look at me, I'm locked up in this place, powerless to do anything; my church is being assaulted by this wicked man, when it should be the other way around. The heretic should be suffering, not the body of Christ.' I wanted to retaliate, to strike back, but, of course, I was confined in prison. I felt tormented and full of confusion.

"On Easter morning, while several of my friends got up early to gather for a season of anguished prayer, I remained in my cell, restless and burdened with mental anguish. In this frame of mind, I entered the chapel with the rest of the inmates for the Easter service at ten o'clock. As we began to find seats in the crowded chapel, I saw my friend Alton Wayne Roberts [also convicted for his role in the murders of Chaney, Goodman, and Schwerner] and the two of us took a seat next to each other in the pew. I immediately noticed that we were surrounded by some real degenerate types: dope dealers making transactions, homosexuals seeking dalliances, all kinds of perverted, disreputable characters. There were also two or three bad niggers sitting directly behind us, saying all sorts of crazy things, insults, and slurs.

"But Wayne Roberts was a man with a justifiable reputation as a physical militant, and he began talking to me in a loud voice, obviously hoping to pick a fight with the black guys. I felt torn between allegiances. Had I been alone in the chapel, I would have ignored the situation because I was determined to keep a clean prison record. But there was a bond between the two of us. I felt like I should back Roberts up—whatever he did. We were all on the verge of physical violence when the minister appeared at the front of the chapel—not in the pulpit but in the space just beneath it. His arms were raised in celebration. He spoke with an excited voice, wishing the blessing of the resurrected Christ on all of us. I noticed tears in his eyes. He wanted us to know that God was real and full of majesty.

"In a semicircle behind him stood a racially mixed choir of reprobates that had been assembled for the occasion. When the minister concluded his invocation, the choir began to sway back and forth, singing 'The Battle Hymn of the Republic.' As suddenly as the singing began, another choir, this time invisible and angelic, surrounded the prison choir with a deep, thundering resonance. Their singing swelled up from the chapel front and flowed over the congregation. I don't fully understand what happened next. I was jolted—swept away—by the music. I began to shake. My heartbeat accelerated. I felt disoriented and dizzy. It was a moment of pure ecstasy, like a lightning flash. Then the choir concluded the anthem, and we all sat down and the service proceeded. But I remained transformed. My mental anguish was gone. My restless thoughts were calmed. God had spoken deep inside my soul: 'Be not afraid, the Lord your God is God.'

Portraits of Schwerner, Chaney, & Goodman in Aaron Henry's drugstore. Clarksdale, Mississippi. 1986. Photo by Milly Moorhead.

"When we got to the mess hall after the service, I sat down at a table next to a notorious racist, who was always a little deferential towards me. When the fellow saw me, he leaned over at the table and asked: 'What in the world was going on in chapel?' I turned to him and smiled, 'That, my friend, was the Holy Spirit.' 'Man, I've never felt anything like that before in my life,' said the man. 'No, and you may never again,' I replied.

"You see, God visited us that Easter Sunday, He came to us as an experience of the actual undeserved imposition of the Holy Spirit on our depraved human consciousness. My anger was gone; and with it, my murderous desire for the heretic. There was a quick change of black and white to technicolor; a change that was immediate—instantaneous. I returned to my cell that afternoon, feeling certain that I could never again condemn heresy from the standpoint of rage, but from a vigorous orthodoxy, from reason, as best I can."

I leave Uncle Roy's pondering his words—his meandering observations on his childhood, his millenarian hopes for Christian America, his prison epiphany. There were years of unmitigated rage, when violence tore through his imagination like shattering glass—like shotgun blasts. He conspired to kill good men without remorse.

In the end, how do I understand his rage—his evil? Did original sin beget it all? Did some primeval funk disseminate through the loins of his forefathers? Did he have a demon, as one Civil Rights veteran told me? Or can his life be understood as a series of moral options and calculated choices? There are so many takes on the answer; so many grand narratives.

I have my whole life turned my face from these years as one would deliberately veer away from the scene of disaster. But there is now one thing I know for sure: that having looked into the face of Sam Bowers, I am none the wiser. ▪