

# NiemanReports

DIVERSITY

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## To Be a 'Negro' Newsman—Reporting on the Emmett Till Murder Trial

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ARTICLE BY

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Simeon Booker, center, covers the Emmett Till murder trial for Jet magazine. He is seated in the Negro press section with, from left, Clotye Murdock of Ebony magazine, L. Alex Wilson of The (Memphis, Tenn.) Tri-State Defender, and Steve Duncan of The St. Louis Argus.

*In 1956, Nieman Reports published Simeon Booker's account of his Jet magazine coverage of the Emmett Till trial:*

**M**illions of words were written about the recent Till murder trial, but the most dramatic and, by far, the most significant development during the hectic week in the backwoods Mississippi community remains untold. It was an incredible interracial manhunt which located three key Negro witnesses whose testimony almost changed the course of the

trial. It involved the unique cooperation of Negro and white reporters, top Negro leaders, and Mississippi law enforcers working together in a hard-hitting team at a time most of the U.S. thought the Dixie state was doing nothing about gaining convictions in the case.

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— *Simeon Booker*

When I came away from the trial, I was somewhat downhearted by the acquittal verdict, but I was not embittered. I was proud of the law enforcers. I personally knew they had done what they could to produce the murder evidence. As a party to this manhunt which even I as a Chicago newsman would describe as unbelievable had gained great respect for three white Southern newsmen, Clark Porteous of the Memphis Press-Scimitar and W. C. Shoemaker and Jim Featherstone of the Jackson Daily News. Porteous, a former Nieman Fellow, served as the main liaison agent for the

operation and he did so unflinchingly in an atmosphere which was charged with tension and fear.

For the group of 12 Negro newsmen who covered the trial, it was a bitter, at times frustrating experience. As soon as we arrived in Sumner, Sheriff H. C. Strider laid down the law there was to be no mixing with white reporters and any violation meant ejection from the courtroom and town. The day before the trial opened, our Jet-Ebony crew ran into a truckload of gun-bearing whites on a truck near Money, Mississippi, which brought it home to us that our assignment was no good neighbor get-together. The Sheriff's edict further restricted our movement. As a result, we stayed to ourselves in the far corner of the courtroom as the antagonistic Exhibit A of Northern Negro reporters who were capitalizing on low-rating the South.

On the first night of the trial, we had a pleasant surprise. Two white reporters (I better not mention names) defied the state's segregation laws to breeze into our town for a visit. They gave us the first report that the trial was “a fix,” that the state had obtained only two witnesses (Rev. Mose Wright and his 12-year-old son, Simeon), both of whom were at the house when Till was kidnapped. Said our guests: “The trial won't last two days. The State doesn't even know where this boy was killed. They have no murder weapon. They have hardly circumstantial evidence of a killing.”

The white reporters also gave us some tips on conduct in the courtroom. Said they: “Take it easy. Don't get excited. They're waiting for just one incident so they can pitch out all of you.”

After the pair left, we got a spine-tingling phone call from Dr. T.R.M. Howard, Mound Bayou surgeon and perhaps Mississippi's foremost Negro civil rights leader. His information: Two Negro workers had vanished on a Milam-owned plantation. One was reported to have knowledge of the crime. What it was no one knew.

The next day we heard reports that other Negroes were being “jailed” or whisked away from area plantations. Why this sudden exit we still didn't know, but we had ideas. But it was not only difficult, it was dangerous to try to track down some of the stories, the section being so hostile to intruders. We continued attending the trial and awaiting further word from Dr. Howard.

Finally, on the day that the state presented its first witness, aging Rev. Mose Wright, things began to happen. A Negro plantation worker, on the pretense of going to church, made his way to Dr. Howard and told him a hair-raising account. He knew of the whereabouts of a group of Negroes who not only had seen Till being carried on a truck into a barn, but later had heard someone beaten and cry for mercy.

Immediately, Dr. Howard met with the Negro reporters and NAACP officials to plot a course of action. This was the hottest story of the trial. It would give the state just the evidence it needed. But there were major problems. There was a vast wall between the races. There were the barriers of mistrust and lack of confidence. One group argued that in the event we continued to withhold this valuable information we would be obstructing justice. But others contended that hasty action would be dangerous. There were lives at stake. In any event, the Negroes had to be taken away from their homes for their safety.

After working out plans to evacuate these potential witnesses, we agreed to call in the most reliable and sympathetic daily paper reporters covering the trial. In return for sharing this headline story, the white reporters would be asked to make the first contact with the law enforcers and prosecution. They would notify them of the new evidence. As our part of the bargain, we would then produce the witnesses.

On our original list of newsmen to be summoned were several topnotch reporters covering the trial. But Dr. Howard refused to accept the full list. He had confidence in one man Clark Porteous, a fair and square Southerner. When he called Porteous, however, Dr. Howard didn't make this clear and Porteous (probably for company) brought along two Jackson Daily News reporters, James Featherstone and W. C. Shoemaker. Thus, these newsmen became the only whites who actually knew of the behind-the-scenes activity, and since they were involved they modestly have refrained from disclosing their roles in later stories.

At the initial meeting, Dr. Howard, in his excitement at the turn of events, forgot to tell the white delegation that his uncovering of the "surprise witnesses" was to be kept secret until they were brought from the plantation. When notified of this, Featherstone balked and stated that he would run the story the next day. Porteous intervened and finally got Featherstone to hold up the story on condition that no other reporter would be tipped off. We agreed on these terms: The whites would have the law enforcers in the town at eight o'clock the next evening when we would produce the witnesses.

The tight ring of reporters also included Jimmy Hicks of the Afro-American, Clotye Murdock and David Jackson of the Jet-Ebony team, and L. Alex Wilson of the Defender.

While excitement increased, we could hardly believe the true impact of our project until Judge Curtis Swango the next day allowed the state to delay its case for a half day. The reason: to find our new witnesses.

But our well laid plans for the eight p.m. meeting didn't work out. The sheriffs of two counties showed up but not the witnesses. We discovered that "some white men" had visited the plantations in question in the morning and by the time our party reached there, the witnesses had vanished, frightened to death. Later, we learned that the visitors were law enforcers who somehow had been given advance information and had probably become restless. So we had new problem sand only some 12 hours to locate our people.

Sheriff George Smith of Leflore County, fair man that he is, promptly routed the pessimism. Said he: "These witnesses have a story to tell. We've got to find them if it takes all night. We'll stop court until we find them."

Some of the law enforcers got on the phone and began calling up plantation owners warning them to produce such witnesses or face legal action.

In this manner, Mississippi's first major interracial manhunt began. Each sheriff agreed to take a Negro and go to a plantation home. All would be visited before morning. The Negro escort would plead with the potential witnesses to testify. There would be no warrants issued. No one would be carted out of his home. We agreed to round up our people and bring them to the State Enforcement Agent's office in Drew.

Three of us (Porteous, Featherstone and myself) followed Sheriff Smith in a 70-mile-an-hour chase along dusty backwoods roads to get 18-year-old Willie Reed. This youth had actually seen Till on the truck and heard the beating. During the run, we got lost and headed back to Drew, where in about a half-hour business began to pick up.

The first Negro rounded up was middle-aged Frank Young. He refused to talk to anyone except Dr. Howard, who hadn't yet arrived at the office. So Young was allowed to go home to be summoned on call. An hour later, when sheriffs went after him again, he was missing. He didn't turn up at his plantation home until two days after the trial.

Throughout the night, the search continued. Each person was brought in and asked to testify. All were frightened. Finally, Dr. Howard promised to take each of those who would testify to live in Chicago. This worked with three witnesses Willie and his 74-year-old grandfather and Mandy Bradley, who later was forced to leave her cabin in the dead of night to get away from the plantation.

When the court opened in the morning, the new witnesses were on hand. Newspapers blared the story of the new witnesses the fact that these people could give an account of seeing Till go into the barn and hearing the outcries; evidence which strengthened the state's case. But none mentioned the all-night manhunt.

Later, special prosecutor Robert Smith praised the work of the reporters in gathering the new witnesses, one of whom, Willie Reed, became the trial's star witness. But the reporter whose calmness and keen judgment was responsible for the smoothness of the operation was Clark Porteous. He was the reporter Mississippi's Negro leaders had faith in because of his outstanding work in the section, and he proved it again at the Till murder trial.

*Simeon Booker, a 1951 Nieman Fellow, is on the staff of Jet Magazine.*

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