

**Ever is a
Long Time**



**A Journey into Mississippi's
Dark Past**

A MEMOIR W. RALPH EUBANKS

Ever Is
a Long Time

This page intentionally left blank

Ever Is a Long Time

*A Journey Into
Mississippi's Dark Past*

A Memoir

W. Ralph Eubanks

BASIC

BOOKS

A Member of the Perseus Books Group
New York

Copyright © 2003 by W. Ralph Eubanks

All photos, unless otherwise noted, are the property of the author.

Photo editing by Vincent Virga.

Published by Basic Books,
A Member of the Perseus Books Group

All rights reserved. Printed in the United States of America. No part of this book may be reproduced in any manner whatsoever without written permission except in the case of brief quotations embodied in critical articles and reviews.

Set in Electra by the Perseus Books Group

Cataloging-in-Publication data for this book is available from the
Library of Congress.
ISBN 0-7382-0570-2

03 04 05 / 10 9 8 7 6 5 4 3 2 1

*For Colleen, and the life we share.
And for Patrick, Aidan, and Delaney, who are the future.*

This page intentionally left blank

*Time is dead as long as it is being
clicked off by little wheels; only when the
clock stops does time come to life.*

— William Faulkner,
The Sound and the Fury

This page intentionally left blank

Contents

Prologue, xi

PART ONE: SAFE IN A SEA OF CALM

One

Mo'nt Ollie, 3

Two

Car Wheels on a Gravel Driveway, 21

Three

Mighty Fine People, 39

Four

Magnolias and Mayhem, 65

PART TWO: TERROR AND MAGNIFICENCE

Five

“The Names Included in This File . . .,” 77

Six

“Ever Is a Long Time,” 109

Seven

Rebel Flags and Bullet Holes, 131

PART THREE: SEARCHING FOR THE TRUTH

Eight

Facing the Firebrand, 155

Nine

Down a Dark Trail, 171

Ten

True Believers, 183

PART FOUR: RECONCILIATION

Eleven

A Trusty Compass, 195

Twelve

Goin' Down South, 205

Epilogue: Return to a Very Cool Place, 223

Acknowledgments, 231

Prologue

“Daddy, what’s Mississippi like?”

My son Patrick, then six years old, once asked me that question during my nightly ritual of lying in his and his brother’s beds just after turning out the lights. I wasn’t sure what I should tell him about Mississippi, so I hesitated before I spoke; still I knew his question had to be answered. As I lay there with him in the dim stillness of his room, I began to weave a story about the farm I grew up on and the simple and sometimes idyllic life my family led. I don’t remember exactly what I said to him that night. I do know that I shared with him one of the many happy memories of my childhood in rural Mississippi. When I finished my rambling reminiscence, his younger brother, Aidan, called out from the bottom bunk:

“Can we go there sometime?”

Of course I said that we could. “But we’ll wait until you’re both a little older,” I told them, a statement they did not question, displaying trust as only children can. Patrick then smiled and hugged me; I kissed them both goodnight and walked out hoping that my story would bring pleasant dreams, yet knowing

that what I had told them was incomplete. Like the trip to Mississippi, the full story would have to wait a few years.

Since that bedtime conversation, I have thought about what I should tell my children about Mississippi; I do want them to understand the world that shaped me, for better or for worse. I should tell them that the Mississippi I grew up in had two cultures: a white culture and a “colored” culture. Mine was the colored culture, one in which poverty was common and those who challenged the status quo and supported integration and equality suffered economic and physical reprisal, even death. I should tell them that the first cut in establishing your status was the color of your skin; if you were black, education had relatively little bearing on your place in society. As a letter to the editor in the Jackson *Clarion-Ledger* once stated, “If every Negro in Mississippi was a graduate of Harvard, and had been elected as class orator . . . he would not be as well fitted to exercise the right of suffrage as the Anglo-Saxon farm laborer. . . .” The conventional wisdom was apparent: Any white person was superior to any black person.

I should tell them about how my father had the title “Negro County Agent,” was paid a fraction of the salary of his white counterpart, and worked in a tiny cinder-block building with a tin roof and no bathroom, in spite of being a college-educated professional. I should tell them about how my mother struggled to teach children from worn, out-of-date textbooks discarded from white schools. I should tell them that five years after their grandfather’s death my family was given the back pay for the years he worked for the Agricultural Extension Service for less than a white man who had the same qualifications.

Still I know these details reveal only part of my Mississippi background. The integration and opening of Mississippi's closed society, sometimes called "Mississippi's second reconstruction" by historians, served as the backdrop of my life from birth until I left Mississippi as an adult. When I was born in 1957, the mindset among white Mississippians was that a baby born in Mississippi that year would never live long enough to see an integrated school. Almost twelve years later, I walked into an integrated classroom, but with a small group of protesters outside bearing brooms and mops, threatening to clean me out of the school like a piece of trash.

Through my parents' sleight of hand, as well as their professional status, my early childhood was left largely unscathed by the chaotic series of events that served as the setting of my childhood. If I wanted my children to have the complete story, I would have to tell them how my parents helped me escape all the terror of Mississippi in the 1960s.

But exactly how did they do this? This question had nagged at me for years, with my mother often just telling me when I posed this question, "It was hard, but we just did whatever we could." After pushing the issue harder, my mother would launch into several elliptical stories, some that reached logical conclusions and others that, at the time, seemed baffling and illogical. In spite of the lack of clarity, the conversations with my mother stuck with me. And with her blessing I began to search for the answers myself.

Just about the time my children began to ask questions about Mississippi, and I began to ask my own, came the 1998 opening of the files of its Civil Rights-era spy agency, the Mississippi

State Sovereignty Commission. In a strident effort to maintain segregation and white supremacy, the state of Mississippi established the Sovereignty Commission in 1956 to spy on its citizens and keep a handle on anyone, black or white, who challenged Jim Crow segregation. The commission recruited informers, harassed Civil Rights workers, and accumulated files about individuals that violated their privacy and could be used to destroy them, and perhaps even kill them. In short, the Sovereignty Commission was empowered to “do and perform any and all acts and things deemed necessary and proper to protect the sovereignty of the state of Mississippi, and her sister states, from encroachment thereon by the Federal Government.” The actions and inner workings of the Sovereignty Commission were secret and known to only a select few in state government. Although it was a small agency, its influence on the culture, mindset, and politics of Mississippi in the late 1950s and early 1960s penetrated every county and town in the state.

During my childhood, I knew nothing about the Sovereignty Commission. From what I had now read about the commission and the newly opened files, I knew that this organization had worked to instill fear in Mississippians like my parents: well-educated, progressive-thinking African-Americans, more commonly known as “uppity niggers.” Consequently, I began to wonder if the answers to the questions posed to my mother about Mississippi, as well as the ones I wanted to give my children, were in those files.

But I resisted.

Partly, I thought that the files would contain information only on activists who posed a threat to staunch segregationists,

not ordinary, middle-class folks like my parents who were NAACP members back then, but could not be called front-line activists by any stretch of the imagination. Subconsciously, I was also afraid that what I might find would somehow tarnish the stories I enjoyed telling my children about Mississippi and defile my pleasant memories about growing up in Mississippi.

But one night I got up the nerve to check.

An Internet search took me to the website of the Mississippi chapter of the American Civil Liberties Union, which I discovered maintained a list of the 87,000 names collected by the Sovereignty Commission during its existence. The 124,000 pages of the Sovereignty Commission's work are only accessible in the Jackson, Mississippi Department of Archives and History. Since I didn't have the desire to go to Mississippi, I decided this virtual exploration would have to do.

An alphabetical list appeared on my computer screen. I clicked on the blue hotlinked letter "E," scrolled down the list, and winced to find "Eubanks." Then I saw the names of my parents: Warren Eubanks and Lucille Eubanks, with my mother's name misspelled as "Lucile."

I began to feel sick, as if someone had suddenly punched me in the stomach. After walking away from the computer in disgust, I sat right back down and stared in disbelief at the names on the screen. Then it hit me: In addition to everything else I had to tell my children, now I also had to explain to them that the state of Mississippi had spied on their grandparents.

Since that night, I have been haunted by seeing my parents' names on an Orwellian list of people who must be watched, lest they threaten the Southern way of life cherished by so many

white Mississippians. After I tell my children about the spying and the harder-edged stories from my early life in Mississippi, the question that now stares me in the face is how much of Mississippi's past remains in the Mississippi of the present? My own mixed marriage, though no longer illegal as it was in the past, is still very much a taboo. In the early 1990s when my wife Colleen and I traveled together in Mississippi, we got our share of idle stares. But we also found ourselves on the receiving end of a few hateful acts, like an attempt to run us off a country road. We even got our own separate seating time for breakfast in our upscale bed and breakfast, an obvious effort to maintain traditional standards of Southern decorum. When the innkeeper found out that I was a native of Mississippi, her sour expression and pursed lips seemed to say, "*you should know better than this.*"

When I do finally take my children to visit Mississippi, will they be welcomed there, or viewed as an affront to traditional standards of Southern society? Although I know that I cannot shield them from racism in American society, the Southern brand of racism is venomous and penetrating, particularly to an impressionable child. The Mississippi of my childhood was often nightmarish, riddled with scenes of intense poverty and despair, black churches set on fire by hateful whites, young bodies buried in earthen dams, and black men murdered by snipers while walking across their front yards. The all-pervading doctrine of the state was one of white supremacy rooted in the philosophical belief in slavery and perpetuated through segregation. The rules of segregation, in turn, were upheld with an iron fist purely to instill a sense of inferiority among the black citizens of Mississippi. And I was part of the group of people in whom a sense of inferiority was to be instilled, and at any cost.

Though the Mississippi I grew up in is different now from what it was when I was a boy, my experience is that there are still vestiges of those times lurking in unexpected places. For a child born today, the rules of Mississippi's segregated society are difficult to understand. I have already tried to explain to my children that once upon a time, in Mississippi and throughout the South, I could have been murdered for the crime of loving their mother. Although they accept that as fact, they don't understand why or how our marriage at one time could have been criminal.

Just as my sons don't understand the randomness of miscegenation laws, I sometimes don't understand why I feel so much affection for Mississippi. During most of my formative years, it was the closest thing to a police state as anything in this country.

Still, I want my children to know the joys I experienced growing up in Mississippi, for often I think that it has done as much for me as it did to me. Mississippi, the land and its history, inhabits and haunts me; its music and rhythms, both the joyful and the melancholy, have followed me my entire life, even when I tried to run away from them. I could never escape because being a Mississippian is the source of my inner strength. It lies at the core of my identity.

The memories of the Mississippi of my youth, though, are locked together with a sense of joy and wonder as well as fear and foreboding. Somehow I have to face up to these two Mississippi's: the one I love and the one I hate. It's time to stop running away from a place that is so much a part of me. Like my children, I, too, must know what Mississippi is really like.

This page intentionally left blank

PART ONE

Safe in a Sea of Calm



Place opens a door in the mind.

—EUDORA WELTY