

determined to be heard



LAMAR SMITH
1892-1955
Murdered for
organizing black voters,
Brookhaven, Miss.

At a time when Mississippi law and white threats kept most blacks from voting, Lamar Smith was determined that his people would have a say in local government.

Lamar Smith, a 63-year-old World War I veteran, commanded unusual wealth and respect for a black Mississippian in the 1950s. He ran a profitable farm, belonged to several prestigious black lodges, and enjoyed fishing and hunting with whites as well as blacks.

Nevertheless, Smith was shot dead by a white man in broad daylight, while a crowd of people watched. And no one was ever tried for his murder because not a single eyewitness would testify that they saw a white man kill a black man.

Lamar Smith's murder remains largely a mystery. But there is little doubt it had to do with politics.

FEARLESS CAMPAIGNER

At a time when Mississippi law and white threats kept most blacks from voting, Lamar Smith was determined that his people would have a say in local government. He fearlessly organized black voters in Lincoln County, campaigned for candidates he judged to be fair, and even helped organize absentee ballot drives among blacks. (It was common practice among whites in the county to misuse absentee ballots.)

Blacks still only made up a small percentage of the total vote, but with Lamar Smith's

efforts, their strength was growing. They might not be able to elect a black candidate, but they could at least make the white politicians pay attention to them.

Lamar Smith was one man who was not afraid to make his voice heard. In July 1955, he campaigned diligently against an incumbent county supervisor. He cast his own vote in the August 2 primary election and was spending the final days before the run-off election campaigning among black voters.

On Saturday, August 13 — nine days before the run-off — Smith went down to the county courthouse on business. As he stood on the lawn, he was approached by several white men who began arguing with him. The courthouse lawn was a popular weekend gathering place, and a number of people watched as one of the white men pulled out a .38-caliber pistol and shot Lamar Smith at close range.

Brookhaven Sheriff Robert Case was close enough to hear the gunshot and see a blood-splattered white man leave the scene. But it was eight days before he arrested three men for the murder.

SILENT WITNESSES

Although many people had witnessed the argument and the shooting, no one was willing to testify to what they saw

on the courthouse lawn that Saturday. Without evidence, the grand jury could return no indictments, and the three white men went free.

The grand jury's report noted that "although it was generally known or alleged to be known who the parties were in the shooting, yet people standing within 20 or 30 feet at the time claim to know nothing about it, and most assuredly





somebody has done a good job of trying to cover up the evidence in this case....”

No evidence has survived to shed light on why Lamar Smith was killed. Prosecutor E.C. Barlow characterized the murder as political, rather than racial. It was “the direct result of local disputes, local politics in the race for supervisor....”

An NAACP investigation showed that Lamar Smith “had

received several threats on his life if he did not slow down on his political activities.” NAACP Special Counsel Thurgood Marshall (who 12 years later became the nation’s first black Supreme Court justice) wrote that Smith’s murder was part of ongoing black voter intimidation in Mississippi and noted that Smith was killed three months after voter registration organizer George Lee was mur-

dered in Belzoni.

One white man who had known Smith for nearly 15 years and considered himself a friend said Lamar Smith was killed for one simple reason: He refused to accept second-class citizenship as a black man. “I’m sure if there was any reason for the shooting it was that Smith thought he was as good as any white man,” he said. ●



Another decade would pass before registering to vote could be as simple as waiting in a line. Here, black voters wait to register in early 1965.