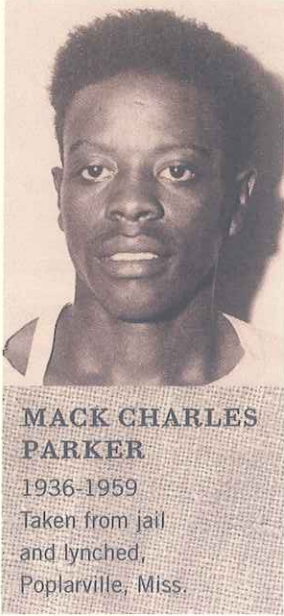
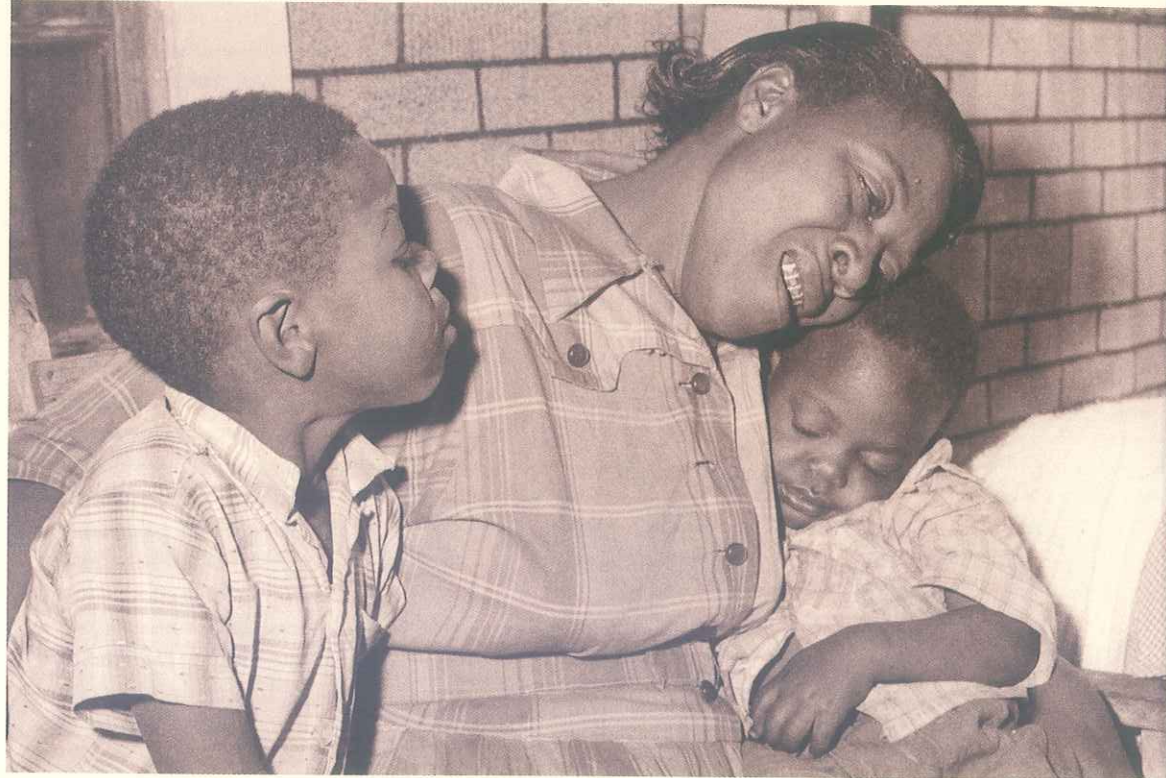


a town blind to justice



MACK CHARLES PARKER
1936-1959
Taken from jail
and lynched,
Poplarville, Miss.



When Mack Parker was arrested for raping a white woman in 1959, a Mississippi state trooper offered his pistol to the woman's husband so he could shoot Parker on the spot. Jimmy Walters recoiled at the suggestion. His wife was not even certain that Parker was her attacker, he reminded the officer.

Few white people in Poplarville, Miss., shared the Walters' sense of justice. So strong was the cry for revenge against Parker that a judge said he couldn't guarantee Parker's safety, and the county jailer started burying the jail keys in his backyard at night. A local newspaper editor wrote, "We have never believed in mob violence, but if M.C. Parker is found guilty of this crime, no treatment is too bad for him."

Mack Charles Parker, at 23, had served two years in the

Army and was working as a truck driver when he was arrested for the rape of June Walters. He lived with his mother, brother, sister and nephew in a poor black section of Lumberton, Miss. He spent most of his wages on the family. On the night of the rape, he had been out with friends. It will never be known whether he was innocent or guilty of the crime.

PRESUMED GUILTY

Most white people in Poplarville were convinced Parker was the rapist. A former deputy sheriff was among many who believed Parker did not even deserve a jury trial, and he recruited a lynch mob from men attending a prayer meeting.

Three days before Parker was to stand trial, eight masked white men dragged him from his jail cell, beat him, shot him in the

heart and threw his body in the Pearl River, where it was found 10 days later. In addition to the former sheriff, the lynch mob included a Baptist preacher and the jailer, who had been persuaded, after all, to give up his keys.

Within hours, most white people in Poplarville knew Parker had been killed, and they knew who did it. But when FBI agents began investigating the lynching, no one in town would tell them anything. Many were afraid of the mob; others simply believed the lynching was justified. The county prosecutor himself praised the lynching and said he would refuse to prosecute anyone arrested for the crime.

Elsewhere, officials were not so ready to set aside the standards of justice. U.S. Attorney General William Rogers called the lynching a "rep-



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MISSISSIPPI STATE OFFICIALS

reprehensible act” and pledged a full investigation. Civil rights leaders said the South’s acceptance of vigilante violence proved the need for national legislation against racist killings. Newspaper editorialists throughout the country denounced the lynching.

The negative publicity only enraged whites in Poplarville, and they took their anger out on Mack Parker’s family. After receiving a barrage of death threats, Parker’s mother, Liza, fled in fear to California. She was on a bus heading west when her son’s body was found. After an American flag was used to drape Mack Parker’s coffin, whites raised such uproar that the Veteran’s

Administration, which had issued the flag, ordered Parker’s sister to return it.

MURDER CONDONED

Finally, persistent FBI agents came up with hard evidence against members of the lynch mob, including several confessions. The evidence was turned over to state prosecutors so they could bring murder charges.

True to his word, the county prosecutor refused to present FBI evidence to the state grand jury, and there were no indictments. U.S. Attorney General Rogers called the state’s action “a travesty of justice” and ordered the Justice Department to build a federal civil rights case. But a federal

grand jury also refused to indict. The lynch mob went free.

The verdict was more than a victory for the killers of Mack Parker; it was a victory for the white South over federal interference. Since 1954, Mississippi had led the South in white resistance to integration. The state even had a Sovereignty Commission to combat “encroachment ... by the federal government.” Soon after Parker’s death, Gov. J.P. Coleman said he hoped Mississippi would not be “punished by civil rights legislation” as a result of the incident.

Some plainly viewed the lynching as an act of heroism against a federal government that was slowly destroying the Southern way of life. As a Mississippi State Sovereignty Commission official put it, “If we sat back and waited for the government to prosecute and punish Mack Parker, it would never happen. So we did it ourselves.”

OPPOSITE PAGE

Liza Parker and her young children mourned the death of her son Mack, shortly before she was forced to leave Mississippi to escape harassment.

BELOW

Mack Parker’s service in the U.S. Army entitled him to be buried in a flag-draped coffin, but whites reacted with such outrage that the Veteran’s Administration ordered Parker’s sister to return the flag they had given her.

