

# quiet perseverance



**HERBERT LEE**  
1912-1961  
Voter registration worker  
killed by white legislator,  
Liberty, Miss.



**LOUIS ALLEN**  
1919-1964  
Witness to murder  
of civil rights worker,  
assassinated,  
Liberty, Miss.

Herbert Lee at age 50 was a small, graying man who had worked hard to build his cotton farm and dairy into a business that would support his wife and their nine children. He had little formal education and could barely read. His wife taught him how to sign his name after they were married.

Lee was a quiet man. Even those who knew him well do not recall hearing him talk about civil rights. But his actions spoke: He attended NAACP meetings at a neighboring farm without fail, even when threats and harassment kept many others away.

Lee's perseverance was one thing that made him valuable to the Civil Rights Movement. Another was his automobile: He was one of the few local blacks with a car of his own. When Bob Moses of the Student Non-violent Coordinating Committee (SNCC) came to Mississippi in 1961 to register black voters, Herbert Lee was his constant companion. Lee spent hours driving Moses and E.W. Steptoe, the local NAACP president, from farm to farm so they could talk to blacks about voting.

In all of Amite County, there was only one black registered to vote, and that person had never actually voted. Most of the people Moses talked to were not enthusiastic about trying to register, and he quickly learned why. The first time Moses accompanied three blacks to the courthouse to fill out registration forms, he was arrested and spent several days in jail. On his next trip to the courthouse, a cousin of the Amite County sheriff beat Moses. Then another SNCC worker was

pistol-whipped and arrested for bringing blacks to a neighboring county courthouse.

After the beatings, no black person was willing to go to the courthouse to register. Most blacks also stopped coming to NAACP meetings. Still, Herbert Lee and Bob Moses kept traveling and encouraging blacks to vote. Prince Estella Lee told her husband over and over again to be careful. She recalled later, "He never said anything, he kept on going. A lot dropped out, but he kept on going."

Moses sent detailed reports on the attacks to John Doar, an attorney with the U.S. Department of Justice in Washington. Doar was so disturbed by the accounts that he came to Amite County in September 1961 to investigate for himself. Moses took Doar to E.W. Steptoe's farm, and Doar asked Steptoe for the names of people whose lives were in danger because of their voting rights activities. Herbert Lee was first on the list Steptoe gave him. Doar looked for Lee, but Lee was away from his farm on business. Doar flew back to Washington.

The next morning, Herbert Lee pulled up to a cotton gin outside Liberty with a truckload of cotton. Several people watched as Mississippi state Rep. E.H. Hurst approached Lee and began to shout. Lee got out of the truck, and Hurst ran around in front of the vehicle. Hurst then took a gun out of his shirt and shot Lee in the head.

**TROUBLED WITNESS**  
As Lee's body lay on the ground, a white man walked up to Louis Allen, a black

farmer and timber worker who had seen the shooting. "They found a tire iron in that nigger's hand," the man said to Allen. Louis Allen knew Lee had no weapon, but he also knew he would be risking his life to say otherwise. So when he was taken to the courthouse to testify before a coroner's jury, Louis Allen lied and said he saw Lee threaten Hurst with a tire iron.

Those who knew about Lee's voter registration efforts had no doubt that he was murdered. Ten days after his death, 115 black high school students marched through the streets of McComb, Miss., to protest the killing.

Louis Allen was tormented by guilt. The 42-year-old father of four told his wife, Elizabeth, and Bob Moses that he lied about the tire iron to protect himself and his family, but now he wanted to tell the truth. "He didn't want to tell no story about the dead," said Elizabeth Allen, "because he couldn't ask them for forgiveness."

Moses told a Justice Department official that if they could give Allen protection, he would testify to what he saw. The government could offer no protection, the official said, and Hurst would probably be acquitted even if Allen did tell the truth.

Allen remained silent to protect his family. For two years, he lived in constant fear. White customers quit buying logs from him, and businessmen cut off his credit. He was beaten in jail after being arrested on false charges. He was told countless times that his children's lives were in danger. He stayed in Amite County





When Bob Moses (left) first came to Mississippi in 1961 to register black voters, he depended on Herbert Lee to be his guide. Moses and Lee spent hours traveling from farm to farm talking to blacks about voting. Although anguished by the deaths of Lee and Louis Allen, Moses continued his efforts to register black voters in Mississippi.

only because his mother was ailing and needed him.

Then, only days after his mother died, Allen began making plans to take his family and move to Milwaukee, where his brother lived. The day before he was to leave — January 31, 1964 — Allen went to a local farmer to obtain a work reference. On his way home, two

cars followed him.

At the bottom of his long gravel driveway, Allen stopped to unlatch the gate. As soon as he got out of his truck, he saw he was being ambushed and immediately dove under the truck. He was hit with two loads of buckshot in the face. Allen's son Henry discovered the body of his father when he returned

home that night from a dance.

No one was ever arrested for the murder of Louis Allen. A reporter later asked a SNCC worker if Allen had been active in the movement. The worker said, "He had tried to register once, and he had seen a white man murder a Negro who tried. In south Mississippi, that made him active." ❁