

braving the fire



VERNON DAHMER
1908-1966
Black community leader killed in Klan bombing, Hattiesburg, Miss.

Ellie and Vernon Dahmer woke to the sound of gunshots and exploding firebombs. Dahmer grabbed a gun and went to his front door. While the fire raged, he stood in his doorway, inhaling the burning fumes and returning gunfire while his family escaped.

By the time he was middle-aged, Vernon Dahmer had overcome the handicaps of racial discrimination and a 10th-grade education to become a wealthy businessman. He owned a 200-acre commercial farm just north of Hattiesburg, as well as a sawmill and a grocery store. Blacks and whites alike had tremendous respect for Dahmer. His businesses provided much-needed jobs for the rural community, and farmers could always count on Dahmer to lend a hand at harvest time.

As Dahmer built his businesses and raised a family of eight children, he never lost sight of the struggle most black Americans faced. He was elected president of the local NAACP and became notorious for urging his friends and neighbors to vote. "If you don't vote, you don't count," many people heard him say. During the violent months of 1964, when Klansmen fired into black homes and burned dozens of churches, Dahmer sat up at night with a shotgun to protect his family. But he did not stop talking about voting.

Members of the Mississippi White Knights, the state's most violent Klan group, kept a close eye on Dahmer. When Imperial Wizard Sam Bowers spoke to the local klavern about putting a stop to civil rights activity, Vernon Dahmer's name was always mentioned. At one such meeting, according to Klansmen who were there, Bowers said Dahmer was a 'Project 3' or a 'Project 4' if possible. In Klan code language, Project 3 meant arson; Project 4 meant murder.

After the 1965 Voting Rights Act was passed, a new sense of hope led more and more blacks to the polls. On January 9, 1966, Dahmer made a public offer to collect poll taxes for his neighbors so they wouldn't have to go to the courthouse in town. He said on a radio broadcast that he would even pay the taxes for those who couldn't afford it.

That night, Ellie and Vernon Dahmer woke to the sound of gunshots and exploding firebombs. Dahmer grabbed a gun and went to his front door. While the fire raged, he stood in his doorway, inhaling the burning fumes and returning gunfire while his family escaped. When it was over, Dahmer's home and the nearby store were destroyed. Betty, his 10-year-old daughter, was hospitalized with severe burns. Dahmer's lungs were irreparably scorched.

From his hospital bed, Vernon Dahmer said, "I've been active in trying to get people to register to vote; people who don't vote are deadbeats on the state. I figure a man needs to do his own thinking. What happened to us last night can happen to anybody, white or black. At one time I didn't think so, but I have changed my mind." He died shortly afterward.

THE COMMUNITY RESPONDS

The death of Vernon Dahmer and the destruction of his home and store sparked a reaction that must have surprised the Klansmen — for this time white officials and community leaders were genuinely outraged. The Hattiesburg City

Council set up a relief fund for the Dahmer family, and a white-owned bank made the first donation. Whites and blacks donated furniture, clothes, and materials to rebuild the Dahmer home. Local officials pledged their full resources to solve the crime.

White sympathy did not erase the anger blacks felt after the murder and arson. A memorial march for Dahmer nearly exploded when demonstrators and police officers got into a pushing match. Young activists began calling for boycotts and pickets, raising the possibility of further violence. However, tensions soon eased when older black leaders presented a list of grievances to city and county officials, demanding equal hiring in public jobs and desegregation in public facilities. Wanting to maintain peace in the aftermath of tragedy, the officials began to make reforms based on the list of grievances.

Dahmer's murder triggered another unexpected response. The federal government, which had shown reluctance in earlier civil rights cases, reacted this time with speed and determination. President Lyndon Johnson sent a telegram to Dahmer's widow, Ellie, praising her husband's civil rights activities: "His work was in the best tradition of a democracy — helping his fellow citizens register and vote. His family can be justly proud as his work was a fine example of good citizenship." Johnson ordered an immediate FBI investigation that was to last more than two months. Fourteen Klansmen were eventually charged with arson and murder.



WHITE KNIGHTS ACCUSED

Billy Roy Pitts, a member of the White Knights in Jones County, pleaded guilty to the arson and agreed to testify at the trials of the other accused Klansmen. Over and over, Pitts described how the Klansmen met with Bowers, scouted out the Dahmer residence, filled plastic jugs with gasoline, and then fired shots into the buildings and threw the homemade bombs inside. Pitts lost his pistol at one point during the attack, but Bowers reassured him there would be no problem if the police found it. "He told me a jury would never convict a white man for killing a nigger in Mississippi," Pitts said.

At one time Bowers would have been right. But times were changing. Three white men — Cecil Victor Sessum, Charles Clifford Wilson and William I. Smith — were convicted of murder and sentenced to life in prison. Bowers and another

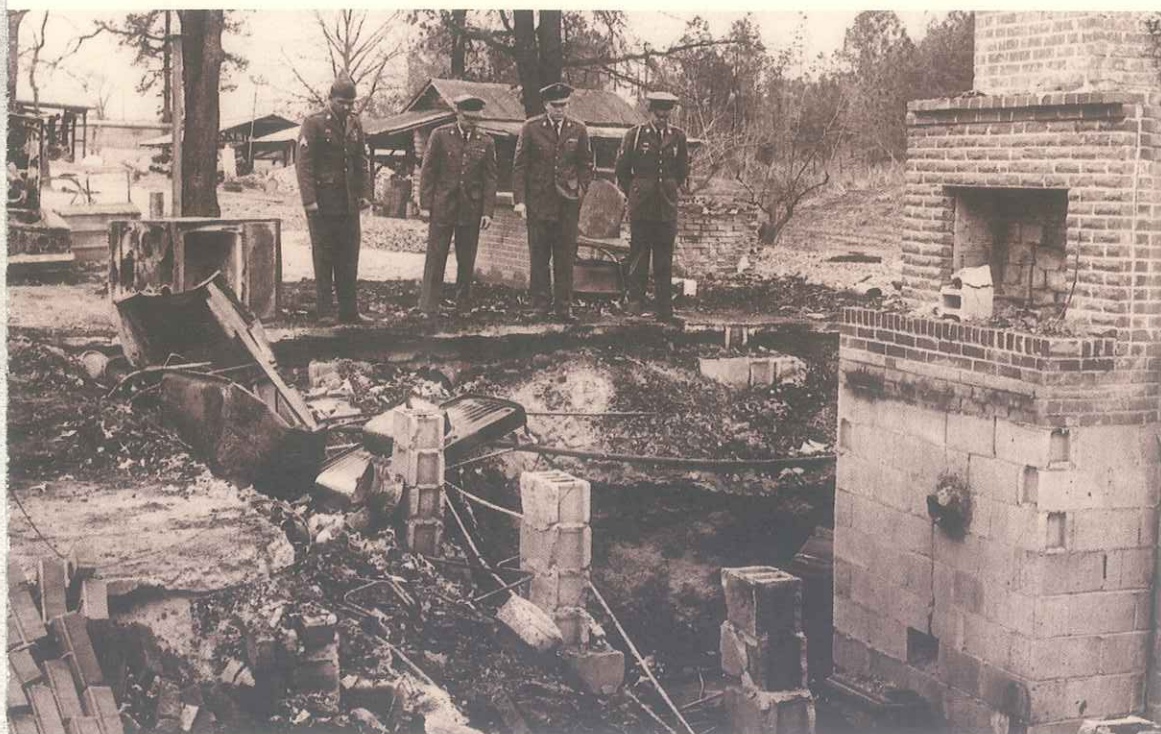
Klansman, Henry DeBoxtel, were freed by hung juries. (Bowers was not yet out of trouble — he was convicted of federal civil rights violations in the murders of Chaney, Goodman and Schwerner and was only awaiting the outcome of his appeal before he would be sent to prison.)

Lawyers for the U.S. Justice Department, dissatisfied with the mixed verdicts in the Dahmer case, filed new charges against 11 of the defendants for violating the 1965 Voting Rights Act. A federal jury acquitted three of the defendants and could reach no verdict for the remaining eight.

The trials in the Dahmer case took place over several years and exposed the brutality of the Mississippi White Knights. Finally, crippled by congressional inquiries, lengthy FBI probes and the conviction of Bowers, the most violent Klan group in the South fell into disarray.

The Dahmer case was officially reopened in August 1991, nearly 25 years after the murder of Vernon Dahmer. It took seven more years for three of the responsible Klansmen — Sam Bowers Jr., Deavorus Nix and Charles Nobles — to be re-indicted and arrested. In 1998, Bowers was convicted and sentenced to life in prison, Nix died before his scheduled trial, and the Nobles case ended in a mistrial. The prosecution later dismissed charges against Nobles. Other Klansmen were not tried due to insufficient evidence and other reasons.

In 1992, Ellie Dahmer, the widow of Vernon Dahmer, was elected Election Commissioner of District 2, Forrest County, Mississippi. For more than a decade, she served in this position, supported by both blacks and whites, in the same district where her husband was killed in 1966 for being an advocate of the black vote. ❁



Four of Vernon Dahmer's sons stand at the site where their childhood home once stood. All on active duty in the U.S. Armed Forces, they were away from home the night of the firebombing.