

into the light



WHARLEST JACKSON

1929-1967

Civil rights leader killed after promotion to 'white' job, Natchez, Miss.

“Wharlest Jackson had begun to climb out of the darkness into the light, and for this he was cut down.”

ROY WILKINS, NAACP EXECUTIVE DIRECTOR

For Wharlest Jackson, getting in the car to go to work each day was an act of courage. Jackson, 37, was the treasurer of the local NAACP during a tense period of protests and boycotts by blacks in Natchez. He worked at the Armstrong Rubber Co., where many of the white employees were members of the Ku Klux Klan. When Armstrong officials responded to civil rights demands by opening more jobs to blacks, Wharlest Jackson was offered a promotion to a higher-paying job as mixer of chemicals — a position previously reserved for whites.

Jackson hesitated before accepting the promotion. Word had spread around the plant that blacks promoted to “white men’s jobs” would not live to enjoy them. These were not idle threats. The local NAACP president, Jackson’s friend and co-worker George Metcalfe, was almost killed when a bomb exploded in his car. Jackson, who had worked at the plant for 11 years, knew the risk he was taking when he accepted the promotion. But he needed the extra money for his wife and five children, and he was proud of the opportunity to help demonstrate the achievements of the Civil Rights Movement in Natchez. Mississippi NAACP Field Secretary Charles Evers, who had lost his own brother to assassins, told Jackson his promotion would help pave the way for others.

George Metcalfe gave his friend a word of advice when Jackson took the new job: Always check under the hood of your truck before you start



it. The bombing of his own car had permanently disabled Metcalfe, and he no longer drove. Instead, he rode to work with Jackson.

On Monday, February 27, 1967, Metcalfe and Jackson were scheduled on separate shifts, so Jackson drove to work alone. He was starting his third week on the new job, and he was full of energy and hope. He told friends that with the 17-cents-an-hour raise, “My wife and children should have a chance now.” That night, at 8:01 p.m., Jackson punched the time clock and started for home in a pouring rain. Ten minutes later, a time-delayed bomb that had been planted under

the frame of his pickup truck went off, ripping apart the cab and killing Jackson.

“ACT OF SAVAGERY”
The murder of Wharlest Jackson brought sharp reactions from both blacks and whites in Natchez. Charles Evers, instead of preaching love and forgiveness, gave voice to the bitterness that blacks felt after a decade of civil rights murders. The day after Jackson’s death, he led 2,000 blacks to the gates of the Armstrong plant, to “put ourselves before all the Kluxers and say ‘You killed our brother, now kill all of us.’” And he hinted that the patience of many blacks was wearing thin. “Once we learn



to hate, they're through," he said. "We can kill more people in a day than they've done in 100 years." He threatened a boycott if Armstrong officials did not fire the Klan members on its payroll.

The murder and Evers' stern response spurred white officials into quick action. The Natchez Board of Alderman offered a \$25,000 reward for information leading to Jackson's killers, and the Armstrong Co. added \$10,000 to the reward money. The mayor, police chief and sheriff attended a black mass meeting for the first time ever, assuring

the community that the case would be vigorously pursued and linking arms at the end of the meeting to join in the civil rights anthem "We Shall Overcome." Mississippi Gov. Paul Johnson called the bombing an "act of savagery which stains the honor of our state."

National NAACP Executive Director Roy Wilkins praised city leaders for their response to Jackson's death and said, "Things have changed ... throughout the state of Mississippi."

Nevertheless, Jackson's killers were never identified.

Wharlest Jackson was given a military funeral service on

March 5, 1967. He was a Korean War veteran, and his body was placed in a flag-draped casket. At the funeral, Wilkins talked about the long history of racial oppression that had kept American blacks poor and powerless. "Wharlest Jackson had begun to climb out of the darkness into the light, and for this he was cut down," Wilkins said.

The Natchez police reopened the investigation of the car bombing in 1998, but no one has ever been arrested for the crime. Authorities believe that all suspects in the case are now dead. ❁

OPPOSITE PAGE

The explosion left Jackson's pickup truck in pieces.

BELOW

White resistance strengthened as civil rights activities intensified in Mississippi. It took great courage to defy the barriers of racial segregation.

