

anonymous target



WILLIE BREWSTER
1926-1965
Killed by Nightriders,
Anniston, Ala.

It was the first time during the civil rights era that a white person was convicted of killing a black person in Alabama. The guilty verdict astonished everyone, including civil rights leaders who had already made plans to protest an acquittal.

The National States Rights Party (NSRP) had more in common with the Ku Klux Klan than with a political party. Its claim to fame during the 1960s was a "riot squad" of two men — Connie Lynch and J. B. Stoner — who hated blacks and Jews so much that they became evangelists of violence, traveling the South delivering fanatical racist speeches to whoever would listen.

Although the term "lynch mob" was coined long before Connie Lynch began his escapades, the irony is appropriate. Lynch, who called himself a minister, frankly urged his listeners to "kill the niggers," and sometimes named specific targets in the towns he visited. After Klansmen in Birmingham bombed a church, killing four schoolgirls, Lynch told a white crowd: "If there's four less niggers tonight, then I say, 'Good for whoever planted the bomb!'"

On the night of July 15, 1965, about 100 white people

gathered at the courthouse in Anniston, Ala., to hear Connie Lynch speak. He told the audience there should be a special medal for whoever killed Viola Liuzzo. He promised that all politicians who supported civil rights efforts would be hanged when the National States Rights Party took over the country. He went on to say, "If it takes killing to get the Negroes out of the white man's streets and to protect our constitutional rights, then I say, yes, kill them!"

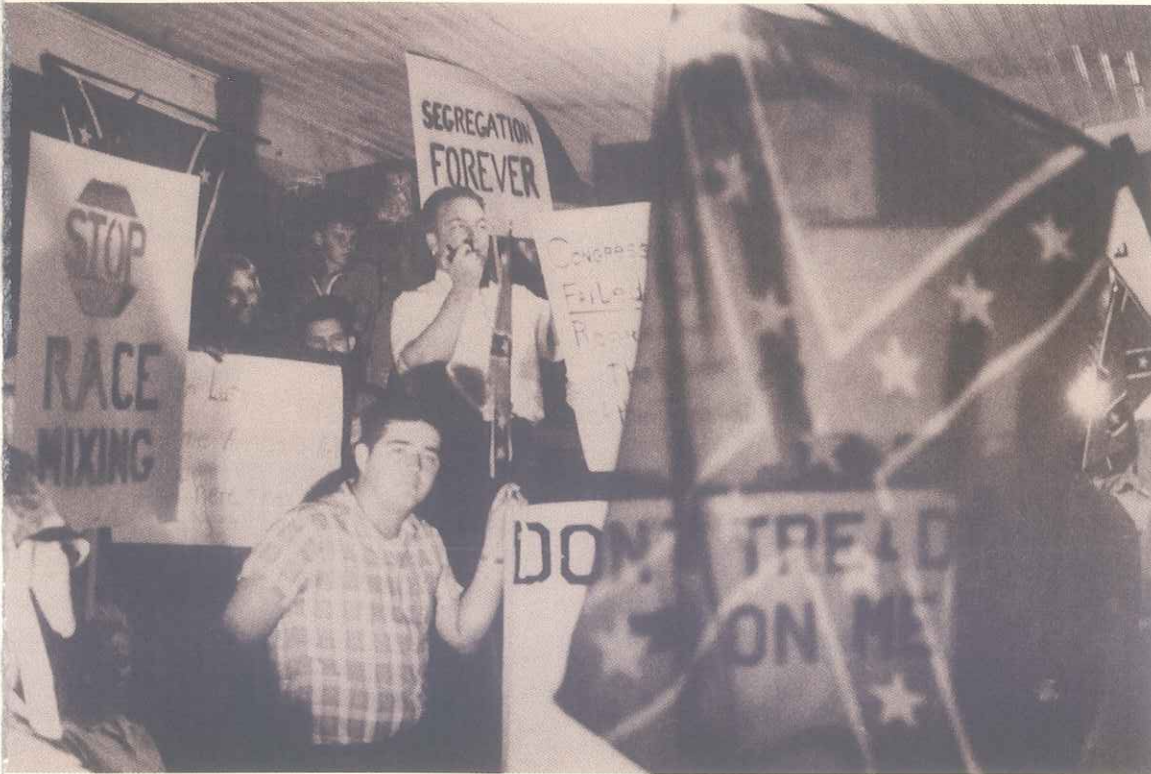
Sitting at the podium while Lynch spoke was J.B. Stoner, the NSRP lawyer who made a business of defending Klansmen and others charged with racist crimes. Next to Stoner was Kenneth Adams, another NSRP official who owned part of a local oil distribution business and who once assaulted the famous black singer Nat King Cole at a concert in Birmingham. In the audience was one of Adams' employees,

23-year-old Hubert Damon Strange, and his friend Jimmy Knight.

About the time Lynch's tirade reached its peak, three black men were getting off work from a local pipe foundry. One of them was Willie Brewster, a hard-working 38-year-old who raised his own vegetable garden in addition to working at the factory. When the shift ended on the night of July 15, Brewster got in a co-worker's car for the ride home to Munford, a small town 20 miles from Anniston, where Brewster's pregnant wife Lestine was waiting with their two small children.

Willie Brewster was described by his boss as someone who "went beyond his duties to help." When his friend complained of aching feet during the drive home, Brewster took over the wheel. He was driving down Highway 202 when three gunshot blasts tore through the back window. A bullet slammed into Brewster's spine and he





OPPOSITE PAGE

A large crowd attends the funeral of Willie Brewster.

LEFT

National States Rights Party leader J.B. Stoner (with microphone) traveled the South encouraging violence against blacks.

slumped over the wheel. The uninjured riders caught a glimpse of several white men in a passing car as they tried to regain control of their own vehicle.

ENEMIES OF US ALL

For the next several days, Lestine Brewster sat with her husband at the hospital while a local newspaper raised reward money for information leading to his assailants. The reward offer, wrote an *Anniston Star* editor, "says to Willie Brewster and to the world that he is not alone at this moment, that the persons who brought him to the point of death ... are not just his enemies. They are enemies of us all, and we stand together in opposition to them." Civic leaders raised \$20,000 within 12 hours, and Alabama Gov. George Wallace added another \$1,000 to the reward fund.

The doctors told Lestine that if her husband lived, he would be paralyzed from the waist down. Willie tried to reassure his wife, saying, "I'm going to get well." But three days after the shooting, he died. Lestine had to be hospitalized immediately, and a month later she lost her baby through miscarriage.

Three white men — Hubert Damon Strange, Johnny Ira Defries and Lewis Blevins — were indicted for the murder of Willie Brewster on August 27, 1965. Strange, the first to be tried, was represented by NSRP lawyer J.B. Stoner. Jimmy Knight, who had attended the NSRP meeting with Strange, was the star prosecution witness. He testified that he heard Strange boast "we got us a nigger" after the shooting.

After 13 hours of deliberation and 20 ballots, the all-white

jury returned a second-degree murder conviction against Strange and sentenced him to 10 years in prison. It was the first time during the civil rights era that a white person was convicted of killing a black person in Alabama. The guilty verdict astonished everyone, including civil rights leaders who had already made plans to protest an acquittal.

Hubert Strange never served his prison term. While he was free on bond waiting appeal, he got into a barroom brawl with another man and was killed. Johnny Ira Defries was acquitted of murder in a second trial. In 1980 Stoner himself was convicted for the racial bombing of a church in Birmingham. After serving several years, he was released from prison in 1986 and returned to his white supremacist activities. ☸