

# leaping into the dark



**WILLIE EDWARDS JR.**  
1932-1957  
Killed by Klansmen,  
Montgomery, Ala.

Every victory of the civil rights struggle brought a backlash of brutality. When blacks in Montgomery finally won the right to fair seating on city buses in December 1956, they were harassed and beaten by angry whites. Klansmen marched in robes through the city streets to intimidate black bus riders. A white gang attacked a teenage girl as she got off the bus. And a pregnant woman was shot in the leg by white snipers.

Then, early one Sunday morning, dynamite bombs ripped through four churches and several homes belonging to ministers sympathetic to the bus boycotters. Two Klansmen — Sonny Kyle Livingston and Raymond York — were arrested. Martin Luther King Jr. was among the spectators who

packed the courtroom when they went to trial.

King wrote later: “The defense attorneys spent two days ... arguing that the bombings had been carried out by the MIA (the Montgomery Improvement Association, which sponsored the boycott) in order to inspire new outside donations for their dwindling treasury... On the other hand (the prosecutor) had an excellent case. The men had signed confessions. But in spite of all the evidence, the jury returned a verdict of not guilty... Raymond D. York and Sonny Kyle Livingston walked grinning out of the courtroom.”

Years later, in a dramatic confession to authorities, a Klansman described a murder that had taken place in the aftermath of the Montgomery

bus boycott. Since the bombings had left no victims, he said, several Klan members decided to kill a black man. They picked a black truck driver who they suspected was dating a white woman. Instead, they killed Willie Edwards Jr. by mistake.

## MISTAKEN IDENTITY

On January 23, 1957, Edwards came home tired from his job as a truck driver for Winn-Dixie supermarkets. Less than an hour after he got home, a supervisor telephoned and asked him to come back to work. Another driver had called in sick, and Edwards was needed to drive his route.

Willie Edwards began driving a delivery route for Winn-Dixie in 1953 — a year before the Supreme Court outlawed school segregation and two years be-

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fore Rosa Parks was arrested in Montgomery for refusing to give up her seat on a bus. He and his wife, Sarah Jean, and their three young children lived in Montgomery but kept their distance from the dangerous business of civil rights. Edwards had never participated in the boycott, and he had few ambitions beyond providing for his family and contributing to the work of his church.

The night Willie Edwards was called in to substitute for his co-worker, a carload of Klansmen was waiting near the Montgomery County line for a black driver in a Winn-Dixie truck who they heard was dating a white woman. When Edwards appeared, they stopped

him and ordered him to get in their car. Not knowing their intended victim by sight, they assumed Edwards was the driver who had called in sick.

According to later testimony, the Klansmen "slapped him around a bit" and threatened to castrate Edwards, but he consistently denied having made advances to any white woman. They drove Edwards through the countryside for most of the night, harassing him until he was nearly paralyzed with fear.

Then they took Edwards to the Tyler Goodwyn Bridge in north Montgomery County and pulled a gun on him. Edwards cried and begged for his life.

"Jump," they said. Edwards saw his only chance of survival

in the dark Alabama River below him, and he jumped.

A fisherman found the decomposed body of Willie Edwards floating in the river three months later.


**A CASE TWICE CLOSED**

A brief investigation turned up no murder suspects, and the case was closed. Then, 19 years later, Alabama Attorney General William Baxley was investigating several other civil rights cases, and he learned about the murder of Willie Edwards.

After hearing a confession from Raymond Britt, one of the Klansmen at the scene of the crime, Baxley charged Sonny Kyle Livingston, Henry Alexander and James York with first-degree murder.

The case never made it to trial. Alabama Judge Frank Embry twice quashed the indictments, ruling that they did not specify a cause of death. "Merely forcing a person to jump from a bridge does not naturally and probably lead to the death of such person," he said.

The prosecutors objected to the judge's ruling, pointing out that the body was too decomposed to determine an official cause of death. But the judge stuck to his decision, and the case was dropped.

In 1997, Dr. James Lauridson, the state forensics examiner, exhumed Edward's remains for re-examination. Using modern technology, Lauridson ruled the cause of death to be homicide. The district attorney presented the case to a Montgomery County grand jury, but it refused to return an indictment. The case remains closed. 

**OPPOSITE PAGE**  
Dynamite bombs ripped through four churches one Sunday morning after Montgomery buses were ordered integrated. No one was hurt in the explosions.

**LEFT**  
Klansmen tried to intimidate boycotters by walking down Montgomery sidewalks in 1956, but the boycott continued until blacks finally won the right to sit where they chose on the buses.