

Murder Mystery: Shining a Light on the Story that Newspapers Left Out

A lesson for grades 7+ from Teaching for Change

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The murder of Mississippi voting rights activist Herbert Lee (Sept. 25, 1961) and subsequent murder of witness Louis Allen (Jan. 31, 1964) were key events in the history of the modern Civil Rights Movement. However, they were barely mentioned in the local press at the time and the story is missing from textbooks and public memory today.

We hope that this lesson for high school students and adults can begin to fill that gap. Using a "meet and greet" format, students take on the roles of key people and institutions from the period and interview each other.

These two murders can introduce students to the widespread and institutional use of violence (terrorism) against people of color when they tried to exercise their constitutional right to vote from the end of Reconstruction through the 1960s. [See [Civil Rights Martyrs](#) for more names.] The story also highlights the fight for voting rights and grassroots organizing, carried out in communities all over the country, yet missing from most textbooks which focus instead on marches and individual heroes. As historian Charles Payne notes:

“The Civil Rights Movement’s made up by hundreds, thousands of folk that are historically invisible and anonymous. One way to say it, there is one wing of them come from strong religious backgrounds, people who are committed to say Gandhi and non-violence, that’s one string. Another string of them come from the servicemen, I’m thinking primarily of black servicemen now, who served in World War II and came back with a whole different sense of entitlement about being an American citizen. Mississippi sent close to ninety thousand black men into the service. They come back changed, they come back empowered, both empowered and entitled. There’s a middle class stream that for me is represented by the NAACP, which sets up these string of court victories, which by 1944, gets the white primary outlawed which then becomes over the next seven or eight years the basis of probably most black political organizing in the deep south state. The fact is that blacks can no longer be [legally] excluded from primaries. But somebody has to organize at the ground level, somebody’s got to be willing to walk folk down to the registration office, somebody has to be willing to teach people how to take the test we have to pass. So, all those streams come together with increasing intensity in the 50s and 60s to create the movement.” From [interview](#) about Payne’s book, [*I’ve Got the Light of Freedom: The Organizing Tradition and the Mississippi Freedom Struggle*](#).

The people and stories in this lesson are part of the “streams” Charles Payne refers to, the streams that were central to the river of the Civil Rights Movement and key to understanding how to create social change today.

As a result of engaging in this lesson, students can recognize that:

- Murder and other forms of terrorism were used in an attempt to intimidate and prevent African Americans from exercising their right to vote.

- Local officials and the mainstream media did not pursue justice in these cases and often intentionally tried to obstruct it.
- There were further repercussions for anyone who tried to expose the truth.

The lesson begins with the teacher reading a quote from Student Non-Violent Coordinating Committee (SNCC) organizer Robert Moses. Moses explains that there is more to the murder of Herbert Lee than what was reported in the local paper.

On September 25, 1961 Herbert Lee was killed in Amite County.... The Sunday before Lee was killed, I was down at Steptoe's with John Doar from the Justice Department and he asked Steptoe was there any danger in that area, who was causing the trouble and who were the people in danger. Steptoe had told him that E. H. Hurst who lived across from him had been threatening people and that specifically he, Steptoe, Herbert Lee and George Reese were in danger of losing their lives.

We went out, but didn't see Lee that afternoon. At night, John Doar and the other lawyers from the Justice Department left. The following morning about 12 noon, Doc Anderson came by the Voter Registration office and said a man had been shot in Amite County. I went down to take a look at the body and it was Herbert Lee; there was a bullet hole in the left side of his head just above the ear.

I remember reading very bitterly in the papers the next morning, a little short article on the front page of the *McComb Enterprise Journal*, said that:

The Negro had been shot in self-defense as he was trying to attack E. H. Hurst.

That was it. You might have thought he had been a bum. There was no mention that Lee was a farmer, that he had a family, that he had nine kids, beautiful kids, that he had been a farmer all his life in Amite County and that he had been a very substantial citizen. It was as if he had been drunk or something and had gotten into a fight and gotten shot.

Our first job was to try to track down those people who had been at the shooting, who had seen the whole incident.

The teacher alerts the students that they are going to step into the shoes of many of the people who were around at that time. They will interview each other and try to determine the story behind the brief description in the *Enterprise Journal*.

Students will also be able to engage in an informed discussion about this essential question:

- What was the impact of the murders of Herbert Lee and Louis Allen on Pike County? Did the murders set back the voter registration movement or did they strengthen it?

Recommended Background Reading for the Teacher

			<p>These books and more resources on the voting rights struggle in Mississippi and SNCC can be found here: zinnedproject.org/tag/sncc/ Included on the list is the vital Civil Rights Movement veterans website: crmvet.org</p>
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Implementation

Warm-up	Ask students for anything they've heard about the murders of Herbert Lee and Louis Allen in the 1960 in Mississippi. (Ask as though they may have heard rumors).	
Introduction	<p>We are going to step back into history and try to find out what happened. At the time, it was primarily members of the Civil Rights Movement organization, the Student Non-Violent Coordinating Committee (SNCC), who pursued truth and justice in the murder cases of Lee and Allen. For today, we have invited people from all sides of the issue to come to the room so we can get to the bottom of the case as quickly as possible.</p> <p>There were many eyewitnesses and testimonies from local citizens at the time. We are going to start this case with a statement from SNCC organizer Robert "Bob" Moses.</p>	<p>(History detectives)</p> <p>Distribute copies of the handout with the statement by Bob Moses.</p>
Bob Moses statement	<p>SNCC organizer Robert Moses said: On September 25 Herbert Lee was killed in Amite County.... The Sunday before Lee was killed, I was down at Steptoe's with John Doar from the Justice Department and he asked Steptoe was there any danger in that area, who was causing the trouble and who were the people in danger. Steptoe had told him that E. H. Hurst who lived across from him had been threatening people and that specifically he, Steptoe, Herbert Lee and George Reese were in danger of losing their lives. We went out, but didn't see Lee that afternoon. At night John Doar and the other lawyers from the Justice Department left. The following morning about 12 noon, Doc Anderson came by the Voter Registration office and said a man had been shot in Amite County. I went down to take a look at the body and it was Herbert Lee; there was a bullet hole in the left side of his head just above the ear.</p> <p>I remember reading very bitterly in the papers the next morning, a little short article on the front page of the <i>McComb Enterprise Journal</i>, said that the Negro had been shot in self-defense as he was trying to attack E. H. Hurst. That was it. You might have thought he had been a bum. There was no mention that Lee was a farmer, that he had a family, that he had nine kids, beautiful kids, that he had been a farmer all his life in Amite County and that he had been a very substantial citizen. It was as if he had been drunk or something and had gotten into a fight and gotten shot.</p>	<p>Teacher reads or asks for volunteers. Students follow along.</p> <p>Distribute student roles</p>

	Our first job was to try to track down those people who had been at the shooting, who had seen the whole incident.	
Student Roles	<p>Teacher distributes roles. Ask the students to read their role carefully a couple of times because in a few minutes they will be taking on their character. They should get a sense of how their character feels at this point about the voter registration drive that is going on in McComb in the early 60s.</p> <p>(If useful, teacher can ask the students to write a line or two in their own voice about how they feel at this point about the voter registration drive that is going on in McComb in the early 60s. Note that one of the characters is not a person, but a group. Teacher can model – I feel hopeful, we’ve been waiting a long time but I’m scared for my family...” or.... “I don’t like these outside agitators coming to town and will do anything to preserve our way of life....”)</p>	[If too many roles, remove roles of witnesses and undertaker.]
Assignment	<p>Teacher explains that students will have time to meet and interview three other people to try to find out what the <i>Enterprise Journal</i> left out of the story – and to see who else was involved. Your goal is to find out more about the 1961 Herbert Lee murder than the brief description in the <i>Enterprise Journal</i> and what, if any, link there was to the Louis Allen murder in 1964. By the end of this exercise you should be able to answer these questions:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Who else was involved and how? • What motivated their actions? • How did the murders of Herbert Lee and Louis Allen impact the lives people living in Pike and Amite Counties? <p>Let students know how much time they have to meet and interview three people who are not in their groups. They should try to be relatively quiet – the “powers that be” don’t want the true story told, so even asking questions is considered a subversive act. They should also remember to STAY IN ROLE while they conduct the interviews.</p>	Distribute interview sheets
Interviews	[Interviews]	
Small group debrief	<p>After 10 minutes, bring the students back to their seats. Ask them to take a few minutes to share what they learned about the murders of Herbert Lee and Louis Allen that they did not know before.</p>	

Small group assignment	<p>Have students work in their groups of 4 to sketch out the story that should have been in the newspaper.</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Your group's story must reflect the perspectives of all four roles. 	Have students designate a scribe
Group discussion	<p>Tell students it's generally been accepted (alleged) that:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> The Herbert Lee murder was designed to intimidate voting rights activism The local officials and media did not pursue justice <p>Ask them how they feel people reacted? How would they have reacted</p>	

What really happened? Background for teacher, from the interview introduced above with Bob Moses.

Essentially, the story was this: they were standing at the cotton gin early in the morning and they saw Herbert Lee drive up in his truck with a load of cotton, E. H. Hurst following behind him in an empty truck. Hurst got out of his truck and came to the cab on the driver's side of Lee's truck and began arguing with Lee. He began gesticulating towards Lee and pulled out a gun which he had under his shirt and began threatening Lee with it. One of the people that was close by said that Hurst was telling Lee, "I'm not fooling around this time, I really mean business," and that Lee told him, "Put the gun down. I won't talk to you unless you put the gun down." Hurst put the gun back under his coat and then Lee slid out on the other side, on the offside of the cab. As he got out, Hurst ran around the front of the cab, took his gun out again, pointed it at Lee and shot him.

Hurst was acquitted. He never spent a moment in jail. In fact, the sheriff had whisked him away very shortly after the crime was committed.

Now we knew in our hearts and minds that Hurst was attacking Lee because of the voter registration drive, and I suppose that we all felt guilty and felt responsible, because it's one thing to get beat up and it's another thing to be responsible, or to participate in some way in a killing.

Handout: Student Roles

Cut into strips with one role per student.

HERBERT LEE

DAIRY AND COTTON FARMER

I am a charter member of the Amite County NAACP. Sheriff Caston tried to shut us down in 1954, but I wasn't going anywhere! We have got to get our voting rights down here. When Bob Moses came here I took him around to meet some of the folks to get them to register. I drove around some of those kids from McComb who are trying to get folks organized. I have to make things better for my nine kids. I can't read and write, but my wife and children all can. I wish I could send them to Louisiana for school. Whenever I can, I sell my dairy products in Louisiana, and drive out of my way for gas and stores, because the stores around here cheat Negroes. I only allow my kids to work for me, on our farm. Some of the neighbors think I am putting on airs, like I think my kids are better than everybody else's. But all our kids got a right to be treated fairly and earn a full day's wage for a full day's work. That's what Steptoe, Allen, Bryant, Moses--all of us are trying to do down here.

MRS. PRINCE LEE

MOTHER OF NINE CHILDREN, WIFE OF HERBERT LEE, 1963

They are telling me it was self-defense, that my husband Herbert tried to hit E.H. Hurst with a tire iron. Herbert was a proud man, but he was not crazy. He was always strict with our children and wouldn't allow them to work for anybody else, so they wouldn't have to deal with any nonsense. Herbert couldn't read or write himself, but he made sure all of our nine kids were educated.

At the March on Washington for Jobs and Freedom, they mentioned me along with all the other "Negro women fighters for freedom," such as Mrs. Myrlie Evers and Mrs. Rosa Parks. That was nice and all, but I miss my Herbert and our children needs a father. Sometimes I wish he had stayed away from all that voter registration stuff.

LOUIS ALLEN

OWNER, TIMBER BUSINESS

Three years ago they told me to lie about E.H. Hurst killing Herbert Lee or they would kill my family. But, I couldn't live with the lie. I told Bob Moses, in exchange for federal protection, I would "let the hide go with the hair" to a federal grand jury. The feds would not protect me, but I told the truth anyway. Whites boycotted my business making me drive to Louisiana to buy gas and find customers. Deputy Sheriff Daniel Jones and Sheriff E.L. Caston threatened to kill me for questioning their testimony. Two years ago, Jones arrested me for "interfering" with the law and broke my jaw with a flashlight. Two months later, I tried to register to vote at the courthouse but gunshots and a power outage prevented me. Last November, Jones jailed me again for some nonsense for about 20 days, but NAACP members posted my \$800 bail. It's getting serious, so I need to heed my brother and move to Milwaukee. My mother died three days ago, so I am leaving tomorrow. I will send for Elizabeth and the kids in a few months.

ELIZABETH ALLEN

WIFE OF LOUIS ALLEN

My people, the Taplins, were proud and fought hard to keep our land in the 19th century. I am proud, too. My late husband, Louis, tried to do the right thing, being a Freedom Rider and joining the NAACP. When Herbert Lee was killed, Louis first tried to protect the kids and I when they threatened to kill us all if he told what he saw. Then, his conscience got to him and he wanted to tell the FBI the truth. Either way, he could not win. Louis just wanted to be a good son and take care of his parents. When his mama died, we finally decided it was time to leave town and go up to Milwaukee with Louis's brother. The FBI interviewed me and then said that I told them that Louis had not been involved in voter-registration work. That's a lie. Sheriff Jones told the FBI that Louis and I had a "domestic dispute" and that may have been the cause of Louis's death. That is also a lie. They just keep lying.

HANK ALLEN

SON OF LOUIS ALLEN

I used to drive Daddy to NAACP meetings all the time. He was my rock. I will never forget it: my cousin John Horton and I were coming back home from a party. Daddy had just told me earlier that day, "Whatever you do, son, you look out for your mom and your little sister. I'm gonna go up to Milwaukee, go to work. In about three weeks, I'll be sending for y'all." [in [Jackson Free Press](#).] John and I came home around 11 pm and saw my daddy shot in the head, lying in the driveway. Sheriff Jones acted like he did not care and we are pretty sure he killed my daddy. For years I suffered mood swings and drank heavily. After 24 years, we never got justice, but my son Kevin got a small measure of revenge this week. He walked up to Dan Jones at the hardware store and said, "You thought you killed Louis Allen, but you multiplied him," Kevin told Jones, "There was one; now there are several." Jones just grabbed his chest like he was having a heart attack.

E. H. HURST

MS STATE LEGISLATOR

I was elected to represent the duly registered voters of my district and to create and uphold laws that protect the interests of my constituents. My constituents are the white people of my district. I agree with the Criminal Syndicalism Bill, because it will be our most important weapon against all these Civil Rights agitators this summer. They have been trying to change things around here. If we make it against the law to hold these civil rights meetings, then maybe we can get them to stop. Everything else that has been tried does not seem to work. Guns? They say I shot and killed my boyhood friend Herbert Lee a few years ago, but it was an accident. I told him, "I'm not fooling around this time! I really mean business!" He owed me some money and had a real temper. I didn't run; I got no rabbit in me. Plus, I was a whole lot bigger than him, he was only 5 feet, 4 inches, weighed about 150 pounds and I am 6-2 and 200 pounds.

SOVEREIGNTY COMMISSION

STATE OF MISSISSIPPI, 1956-1977

We know about it all, we've known about everything that goes on in the state ever since 1956, since after the U.S. Supreme Court and the federal government decided to try to change our way of life "with all deliberate speed." The races need to stay separate and all of us make sure of it, from the governor, the state senate and house, to the state supreme court, on down. We use tax dollars to pay spies and informants and to support white Citizen's Councils. We know that Sheriff Daniel Jones's father is president of the Americans for the Preservation of the White Race, Liberty chapter, and the deputy sheriff, the highway patrol, all of them are members. It's how we keep order and keep people in line. We *have* to protect our state's rights, at all cost, against the federal government.

BOB MOSES

ORGANIZER, STUDENT NONVIOLENT COORDINATING COMMITTEE (SNCC)

Twice in two weeks, I was arrested and once severely beaten when some local people tried to register to vote. I filed an assault and battery charge against Billy Jack Caston who was acquitted. Things were heating up, so I asked John Doar of the U.S. Justice Department in McComb to hear directly from the local people what was going on. The next day, Herbert Lee was murdered. No witness would tell the truth in an open court. Today's *Enterprise Journal* said that the Negro had been shot in self-defense for trying to attack E. H. Hurst. There was no mention that Lee had a family, that he had nine beautiful kids, that he had been a very substantial citizen. It was as if he had been drunk and had gotten into a fight and gotten shot. Now we knew Hurst was attacking Lee because of the voter registration drive, and we all felt guilty because it's one thing to get beat up and it's another thing to be responsible, or to participate in some way in a killing. We are absolutely on our own with no possibility of a federal investigation.

E. W. STEPTOE

AMITE ACTIVIST AND DAIRY FARMER

I never leave the house unarmed. I know what these people are capable of doing. I organized the first local NAACP chapter in 1953. Armed whites, led by a deputy sheriff, came and broke up our third meeting. My uncle was so frightened that he ran into the woods and stayed there for a week, living on raw food. When he reappeared, he left the county. I told Doar from the Department of Justice that I went to those SNCC voter registration classes with Lee and Reese, and I told him that Hurst had publicly threatened to kill all three of us. I also told him that whites were recording the license plate numbers of cars at the meetings. I remember telling him "Every Negro in Amite County wants to register to vote, but they're just afraid.... If Negroes voted, we wouldn't have any trouble." I told him that Representative Hurst was the main one people were afraid of. I have known Herbert and Hurst since we were all kids, but now Hurst is acting like all the rest. He murdered Herbert; I could be next. That's why I never leave my house unarmed.

GEORGE REESE

AMITE ACTIVIST

I attended those voter registration classes with Herbert Lee and E.W. Steptoe, too. I was just trying to do the right thing. We need to have more control over our lives, to be able to vote for the people who will protect our interests, instead of state legislators like Hurst who threaten to kill us for just registering to vote. Steptoe is bold; he told U.S. Department of Justice representative Doar, all about the threats.

And Steptoe always carries a gun. Herbert had that kind of quiet power, he made sure he kept his kids safe even though he didn't back down from being active in the NAACP. I don't know what I am going to do now that Hurst killed Herbert. I could easily be next.

JOHN DOAR

U.S. JUSTICE DEPARTMENT

I was just down in Mississippi yesterday, talking with Mr. Steptoe and Mr. Lee! Earlier this year, I was asking Medgar Evers and his wife which counties the federal government should be investigating, and where there was voter registration activity that we should be watching. Mr. Steptoe just told me that most Negroes in the state were fearful of E.H. Hurst, the state legislator, because he was powerful and had threatened to kill them for trying to vote. Mr. Moses and the others kept asking if the federal government could offer protection, but I told them that President Johnson wants to maintain a separation of federal and state powers, and we can only investigate after a federal crime is committed. Well, now a federal crime has been committed, with Mr. Lee dead. That Hurst might have been eager to pick a fight with Mr. Lee because Lee had observed Hurst skulking around the parking lot outside a voter registration meeting, jotting down license numbers. Hurst is my first suspect.

C.C. BRYANT

MCCOMB CRM AND LABOR LEADER

I am the local president of the McComb NAACP and I invited my buddy Herbert Lee to bring Bob Moses around to McComb so we could plan a voter registration project. I have been a crane operator with the Union Pacific Railroad and president of the local railroad union. I also have my own business cutting hair on the weekends, so I am not afraid of speaking out. Plus I worked with Medgar Evers at the state NAACP so I see the whole picture. It is about time we got ourselves more political power and started voting and running for elected office so we can have more control over our own destiny. I am so proud of the young folks who walked out at Burglund High School; the police arrested me and said I was contributing to the delinquency of minors, but those kids did that on their own! That Hurst may have killed my friend in cold blood, but I am not afraid. We have to keep on with our plans to register Negroes to vote so we can gain political and economic equity.

AMZIE MOORE

PRESIDENT, LOCAL NAACP

When I got back to Cleveland, MS after fighting in World War II, the whites were worried that Black soldiers were going to disrupt “the southern way of life” and started a series of racist killings. I organized the community to fight back and get justice. I wasn’t scared of them because I had my own money: I worked for the post office, ran a gas and service station with a restaurant, and had a beauty parlor. As a matter of fact, some other fellows and I started the Regional Council of Negro Leadership to encourage black businesses in the Delta. Last year, I invited Bob Moses of the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee to bring students to Mississippi to start a voting rights campaign. He came back to McComb this year and we sat down and planned it all out. We were going to start in the Delta, here in Cleveland, MS, but we didn’t have any equipment or a place where we could hold meetings. So, when C.C. Bryant invited us to McComb, we set up a voter registration drive there. We didn’t mean for anybody to get killed.

BILLY JACK CASTON

COUSIN OF SHERIFF E.L. CASTON, SON-IN-LAW OF E.H. HURST

Who does Bob Moses think he is? He had the nerve to file a complaint against me a month ago, the first time in Amite County history somebody had the nerve to challenge a white man like that! I am a highway patrolman and Korean War veteran! He’s coming in here stirring up trouble so I had to beat him. I was acquitted, but then Moses and another one of those SNCC people tried to register to vote, again, a few weeks ago. Therefore, me and the boys had to beat them again. They just don’t understand who runs things around here. My cousin tried to tell them and Daddy Hurst, my father-in-law, warned them several times. When Daddy Hurst asked to borrow my truck today, I figured he was trying to talk some sense into them. After all, he grew up with those Herbert Lee and E.W. Steptoe fellows.

E.L. CASTON

AMITE SHERIFF, 1954-1962

It all started in 1953, when E.W. Steptoe started the local NAACP and stirred up over 200 Negroes. We had to go in there, right after the U.S. Supreme Court desegregated schools. We raided the NAACP meeting and confiscated the membership list and files. We could not have people thinking they could change things around here. Then in 1960, Steptoe and Herbert Lee fellow invited Bob Moses to come and start registering Negroes to vote. We had to stop all of that. When Hurst killed Herbert Lee three years ago, we thought that would be the end of it. But then Louis Allen started telling the FBI Hurst killed Lee on purpose. Now, because of that, some folks are saying that Allen was murdered the other day. But, even the FBI agrees: there is no federal crime because, *“..the victim is not a registered voter, has never been active in voter registration activities, and there has been no voter registration activity in Amite County in the past two or three years.”* These civil rights people just won’t stop stirring up trouble.

DANIEL JONES

AMITE SHERIFF

When that boy Hank Allen and his friend came to my house around midnight it startled me, and I pumped my shotgun just in case. He told me his father had been shot. I asked, “Is he dead?”, and pumped the shotgun again. I got in my car and followed the two young men back to the Allen’s home. I told them, “Let me see if I can find what caused the problem.” I searched Louis Allen’s pockets, pulled out his wallet and went through his cash and cards. I found his NAACP membership card, and told Hank that I would need to take the wallet home. I called a coroner’s jury at Allen’s house the next day. It determined that “an assailant or assailants unknown” had killed Hank. Those civil-rights groups keep confronting me, but I keep telling the reporters that I know of no reason for Hank’s murder because he “had not been involved in any civil rights activities.”

WITNESS

AFRICAN AMERICAN

They told me to lie, to say that they were arguing over money and that Lee attacked Hurst with a tire iron and Hurst’s gun went off accidentally. The sheriff and all of the white folks told me to lie. I even heard them tell Louis Allen that if he told the truth that they would kill his entire family. I had to think about my family, too. As it is, Herbert Lee’s nine kids have lost their father over some civil rights stuff. We need to get organized, to end the violence and the unfairness, and I would like to vote people like Hurst out of office, but I can’t get killed for it. There has to be another way besides more of us getting killed. I wish I could look Mrs. Lee in the face and tell her why I could not touch Herbert’s dead body. I knew she would understand, but it makes me as much a coward as Hurst. Herbert was a good man. It is such a shame that he is no longer alive.

WITNESS

AFRICAN AMERICAN

I wanted to put Herbert’s body in my truck and take it to the undertaker’s myself, but did not because of all those white men, the sheriff, and the deputies. Hurst, would have killed me in broad day light just like they killed Herbert. They have no shame and they are cowards. If we had all our guns maybe we could have avenged Herbert’s death right then and there. Who am I fooling? I would be hung from the nearest tree after they shot me full of holes. They told me to lie about what happened and I did. Now, I have no choice but to do what Herbert would have done: which is, organize us Negroes to vote. I have to do it for Herbert’s nine kids and for my kids. Got to take power in a non-violent way because killing just gets more of us killed.

WITNESS

WHITE

Yeah, I saw Hurst do it. He killed Herbert Lee in cold blood, right there. Lee didn't have any weapon, no gun or anything. He even told Hurst he wasn't going to talk to him unless Hurst put the gun down. Hurst faked like he was putting the gun away, Lee got out of the truck, and Hurst ran around and shot him right in the head. It's a shame. And, I did not dare touch Lee's body; just had to let it lay there.

Hurst is supposed to be a state legislator and he is acting like a common criminal. I heard that Lee was trying to get Negroes registered to vote and maybe Hurst thought he would lose his seat if all these Negroes voted him out of office. I don't know. It's just not right. But, what can I do? Hurst can cause me to lose my job. He might even be involved with that group Americans for the Preservation of the White Race, I don't know. They kill white people, too, who talk too much. What can I do?

WITNESS

WHITE

Hurst did it, he killed Herbert Lee. But, Lee had it coming. He has been bringing all those civil rights people in Amite County and in Pike County and it just is not right. We have got to protect our way of life around here and people need to stay in their proper place. We have been keeping order around here for decades and Hurst was just doing what we elected him to do. He might have even had something to do with that Criminal Syndicalism Bill the state senate approved back in May. The bill outlaws any meeting, gathering, group or any other such coming together of people for the purpose of any change in ownership or custom either agricultural, industrial or social, or for the purpose of any control, political change or for profit. He did the right thing, killing Lee.

PERCY HAZELWOOD

WHITE, GROCERY OWNER

Joe never tried to register to vote; none of my Negro workers have. But Sheriff Dan Jones had a meeting with those Americans for the Preservation of the White Race folks in his office and they said they were "satisfied with what they knew that Joe was guilty." So, I fired Joe, even though I knew he was innocent. I even tried to go visit Sheriff Jones to keep the white folks from boycotting my grocery store. But, they did anyway. They were scared, because we noticed men over at Bryant Jones' place, watching our front door all day long. Nobody wanted to go against the sheriff who said he would come up here and pay his bill and never come in here again. They even tried to scare my sister, who received phone calls with nothing but silence on the other end. They are trying to kill my business even though me and my Negro workers are not involved in civil rights!

AMITE CORONER'S JURY

We had the fellas in here with their guns, just in case anything got crazy. There's been a lot of civil rights activity around here and in McComb lately and you can't be too careful. The sheriff wanted to have the trial today, while everything is still fresh. Representative Hurst testified that Lee owed him money and that when he had asked about it, Lee had "come at him with a tire iron." Lee, he said, "had an ungovernable temper." Hurst claimed he had walked around the front of the truck to meet the Negro. "I didn't run," he said. "I got no rabbit in me." Hurst explained the .38 he was holding in his other hand had at that moment "accidentally" discharged. "I must have pulled the trigger unconsciously," Hurst swore.

All of those other witnesses said the same thing, that Lee attacked Hurst with a tire iron, and Hurst's gun went off accidentally. We have no choice but to declare that Hurst killed Lee in self-defense. We decided that Hurst did not need to spend any time in jail as a result.

UNDERTAKER

AFRICAN AMERICAN, MCCOMB, MS

It is such a shame they let that man's body lie there for two hours. All those people saw Herbert Lee get shot, but nobody in Liberty had the decency to touch it or cover it up! They were scared for their lives, scared that Hurst would kill them, too. Hurst is a state legislator. He could get my undertaker's license taken away. But, Herbert Lee was a good man. His body couldn't just lie there for the vultures to pick at it. I had to send a hearse out to Liberty to get the body and prepare it for his wife and those nine kids he left behind. I just pray I don't lose my license over this. Or my life.

LOUIS KING

WHITE

I am Louis Allen's boss. He has worked for me for several years as a truck driver. He is a good truck driver and he can also operate a CAT. I am very pleased with his work. He is a good man, he takes care of his family, and he used to run a good logging business until that whole situation with Herbert Lee happened a few years ago. It's a shame the way them boys keep harassing Louis and made him lose his business, just because he was trying to clear his conscience and tell the truth. Anyway, Louis tells me he is going to move up to Milwaukee tomorrow to be with his brother Morris. I wrote him a letter of recommendation so someone can give him a job up there. Louis is a good man. It's the least I can do.

Handout: Interview Sheets

Name (in role) _____

Instructions: *Introduce yourself to at least three people in the room. Take turns sharing information about yourself and learning about the other person's identity. How are the two of you connected to one another? Try to complete at least three of the identities on the interview sheet.*

1. I met _____,

and we are connected because _____

and I learned that she or he: _____

2. I met _____,

and we are connected because _____

and I learned that she or he: _____

3. I met _____,

and we are connected because _____

and I learned that she or he: _____

After the interviews

What do I know now about the murders of Herbert Lee and Louis Allen that I did not know before and what questions do I still have?

Handout

In the words of...

Bob Moses, Organizer, SNCC



“ On September 25, 1961 Herbert Lee was killed in Amite County.... The Sunday before Lee was killed, I was down at Steptoe's with John Doar from the Justice Department and he asked Steptoe was there any danger in that area, who was causing the trouble and who were the people in danger. Steptoe had told him that E. H. Hurst who lived across from him had been threatening people and that specifically he, Steptoe, Herbert Lee and George Reese were in danger of losing their lives. We went out, but didn't see Lee that afternoon. At night, John Doar and the other lawyers from the Justice Department left. The following morning about 12 noon, Doc Anderson came by the Voter Registration office and said a man had been shot in Amite County. I went down to take a look at the body and it was Herbert Lee; there was a bullet hole in the left side of his head just above the ear.

I remember reading very bitterly in the papers the next morning, a little short article on the front page of the *McComb Enterprise Journal*, said that the Negro had been shot in self-defense as he was trying to attack E. H. Hurst. That was it. You might have thought he had been a bum. There was no mention that Lee was a farmer, that he had a family, that he had nine kids, beautiful kids, that he had been a farmer all his life in Amite County and that he had been a very substantial citizen. It was as if he had been drunk or something and had gotten into a fight and gotten shot.

Our first job was to try to track down those people who had been at the shooting, who had seen the whole incident.



Optional Handout: Interview Sheet

This handout can be used while students are in role so that they meet and learn about more of the other characters. The teacher can cut the handout into strips with two or three prompts per strip. Divide the strips among the students. They can interview each other in role to fill in the blanks.

- ☐ I _____ was a charter member of the Amite County NAACP in 1954, and owned my own dairy farm with my wife and our nine children.
- ☐ Mrs. Medgar Evers, Mrs. Rosa Parks, and _____ were introduced at the 1963 March on Washington for Jobs and Freedom as “Negro women fights for freedom.”
- ☐ _____’s timber business suffered when I could no longer withhold the truth about Herbert Lee’s death. My family’s lives are at risk so we must go to Milwaukee where it is safer.
- ☐ _____’s people, the Taplins, were proud and did not take any foolishness. We always told the truth, and I was proud of my husband, even though it cost him his life.
- ☐ _____ used to drive his father to NAACP meetings regularly and was devastated when his father was murdered, but was proud that his son Kevin remembered the work of his grandfather
- ☐ E.H. Hurst was a _____ who was elected by the white members of his district to uphold the laws that protected the interest of his constituents.
- ☐ _____ lasted for 22 years to spy on and control all of the activity in the entire state of Mississippi that would threaten racial segregation laws and customs.
- ☐ Bob Moses was invited into Amite and Pike Counties to help organize voter registration activities as part of the _____.
- ☐ _____ was a dairy farmer and organized the first local NAACP chapter in 1953. I told John Doar of the US Justice Department about the harassment from E.W. Hurst. I also believed in armed self-defense.

- ☐ Representative E.W. Hurst said he was looking to kill _____, Herbert Lee and E.W. Steptoe for being involved in voter registration classes.
- ☐ E.W. Steptoe told me, _____, of the US Justice Department about threats from E.H. Hurst, but I told him that President Johnson did not want to interfere in local matters.
- ☐ As the local president of the McComb NAACP, and a union leader and business owner, _____ invited Herbert Lee to bring Bob Moses to McComb so we could plan a voter registration project to get political power.
- ☐ The Regional Council of Negro Leadership was something that _____ helped organize so that all of us with businesses in the Delta could help each other. I invited Bob Moses to Mississippi so we could start a voting rights campaign.
- ☐ Billy Jack Caston was a highway patrolman and Korean War veteran. His cousin was the _____ and his father-in-law _____.
- ☐ As the Amite County sheriff, E.L. Caston raided _____ and confiscated _____. I told the FBI that Louis Allen had never been active in civil rights activities and I should know.
- ☐ Daniel Jones was the Amite County sheriff who was called to see about Louis Allen's death. When I searched his wallet, I found _____.
- ☐ I saw E.H. Hurst kill Herbert Lee, but I feared for my life and said that Hurst's gun went off accidentally. I was _____.
- ☐ E.H. Hurst is supposed to represent me in the state legislature, but acted like a common criminal. I saw him kill Herbert Lee, but he might kill me, too, if I tell. I was _____.
- ☐ I lied about what I saw to protect my family: E.H. Hurst did kill Herbert Lee in cold blood. But I know what I have to do now to organize for voting rights. I was _____.
- ☐ I think E.H. Hurst did the right thing, by keeping the peace and protecting my rights, so I told the coroner's jury that Herbert Lee's death was an accident. I was _____.

- ☐ Dan Jones forced _____ to fire a Black worker in his store who was suspected of voter registration activities and organized a boycott by white residents.
- ☐ We _____ help maintain law and order in the county. When we heard all the witnesses say Hurst's gun accidentally discharged, we had to let him go.
- ☐ I, _____, sent my hearse over to Amite County to get Herbert Lee's body.
- ☐ Louis Allen worked for me, _____, for several years and I wrote him a letter of recommendation for a new job up in Milwaukee.