
Dirt and Deeds in Mississippi: Film Highlights Long Threads in Civil Rights History

William Minter & Michael Honey

Like the episode on Mississippi of the classic film series *Eyes on the Prize*, the Television Academy-Award-winning *Dirt and Deeds in Mississippi* skillfully weaves together interviews with civil rights activists, archival film footage, and original historical research to portray the key period of civil rights history leading up to the Voting Rights Act of 1965. This history is worth recalling in the wake of the presidential election of 2016, in large part the result of decades of voter suppression which threatens to usher in a new period of Jim Crow.

Even in the wake of the civil rights victories of the 1960s, including representation of Blacks in county and state-level politics, the film's setting of Holmes County remains one of the poorest counties in the United States, with more than half of households having incomes under \$21,000 a year (approximately half the state median of

\$41,000 a year, itself the lowest of all 50 states). Holmes County, like most of the Delta region, voted overwhelmingly against Donald Trump in the 2016 election. But Mississippi remains a reliably Red state, where Republicans dominate the state government and hold both U.S. Senate seats and three

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of four of the state's seats in the U.S. House of Representatives.

The themes raised in *Dirt and Deeds in Mississippi*, in our view, have relevance both for interpretation of the centuries-long history of racial injustice and the resistance against it in the United States and for our country in the critical next years of the 21st century. In particular, we are convinced that both past and future need to be analyzed paying attention not only to the successes or failures of specific organizations and institutions, but also to personal and family networks that cross generational, geographic, racial, cultural, and other social boundaries.

This film, narrated by Danny Glover, is also distinctive in several ways that make it a particularly valuable resource for researchers, students, and social justice activists alike:

- While touching on the historic events which received national attention (Freedom Summer, the murders of civil rights activists Chaney, Goodman, and Schwerner; the 1964 Democratic Convention, and President Lyndon Johnson's legislative initiatives on civil rights), its focus is the small rural community of Mileston, in Holmes County, on the edge of the Missis-

issippi Delta just under 80 miles north of the state capital Jackson. And it gives priority to local activists who seldom feature in the national narrative.

- In particular, it highlights the critical roles of Black landowners, in Holmes County as around Mississippi, as the indispensable support base for the movement through providing housing for activists on their farms and armed defense for the organizers of non-violent demonstrations and voter registration drives. Unlike Blacks living on plantations or otherwise dependent on whites for paychecks, landowners had achieved some level of independence and were willing and able to step up as leaders.
- It also reveals links to earlier history, including a little-known initiative of the New Deal, which established the Mileston farmers on good Delta land from a white plantation foreclosed at the height of the Great Depression. On the hill country on the eastern side of Holmes County, other farmers traced their land ownership back over a century. One of these was Robert Clark, whose great-grandfather purchased the land from his former master. In 1967, Clark became the first Black elected to the Mississippi legislature since Reconstruction, and served 36 years, retiring a Speaker of the Mississippi House.

The authors of this review share a common interest in these connecting threads, through different personal connections to the role of the interracial Southern Tenant Farmers Union (STFU) in the region in the decades preceding the 1960s civil rights movement. Honey's latest book, *Sharecropper's Troubadour*, recounts the life and legacy of John L. Hancock,

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Michael Honey (mhoney@uw.edu) is professor of Labor and Ethnic Studies and American History and Haley Professor of Humanities at the University of Washington, Tacoma. Honey has published five books of labor and civil rights history; including *Sharecropper's Troubadour*: John L. Handcox, the Southern Tenant Farmers' Union, and the African American Song Tradition. Honey's most recent work is a film, *"Love and Solidarity: James Lawson and Nonviolence in the Search for Workers' Rights."*

the STFU, and the African-American song tradition. Minter's parents met at the Delta Cooperative Farm in Bolivar County, Mississippi, which grew out of the Southern Tenant Farmers' Union in the 1930s (see *Sharecropper's Troubadour*, pages 90-91), and Minter himself spent part of his childhood in Holmes County, living on the successor Providence Cooperative Farm just at the edge of the hill country.

The STFU powerfully affected a generation of organizers in the Mississippi Delta of the 1930s. Ed King of the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee recalled that civil rights organizers of the 1960s drew inspiration from the STFU's ability to pull together former KKK members and African Americans in both Mississippi and Arkansas who were among the poorest people in America at the time.

John Handcox, born in 1904 near Brinkley, Arkansas, provides a vivid illustration of the themes raised in the film. He not only organized the STFU, but wrote some of its most memorable songs, including "Roll the Union On," and helped to popularize "We Shall Not Be Moved" as a song that became an anthem in the civil rights movement and the Memphis sanitation strike of 1968. The Library of Congress through the work of Charles Seeger and others recorded Handcox's songs in 1937. His songs and his story are

now readily available to today's listeners through Smithsonian Folkways and Honey's oral history, *Sharecroppers' Troubadour*. Although planter violence suppressed the STFU struggle for justice and dignity for rural workers, its songs and legacy of interracial working-class organizing against impossible odds live on even today.

At the local level in Arkansas, where the STFU was strongest, activists like Carrie Dilworth spanned the generations, carrying her activism into work with the NAACP in the 1950s and with SNCC in the 1960s. It is likely that similar stories could be told about the civil rights movement in many more rural counties in the South.

What factors have contributed to the enduring political backlash to civil rights victories in Mississippi over the past five decades?

Among the questions we offer for readers, researchers, and activists are the following, each of which would take far more than a short film review to explore:

About the history

- Did either the STFU or the Delta Cooperative Farm have any influence on the New Deal policies that

led to the establishment of the Mileston community or similar projects elsewhere in the South? Did other such projects have specific influence on the civil rights movement in the 1960s in their local communities and states?

More generally, were Black landowners as central to the local civil rights movement in other Southern states and communities as they were in Holmes County?

- Did the history of the 1960s Southern civil rights movement differ in areas where the STFU worked, in comparison with other areas in other states?
- What was the international influence on interracial cooperative projects in the U.S. South, such as Providence Farm and parallels such as Koinonia Farm in Georgia, which not only survived but gave birth to the prominent Habitat for Humanity project?
- What factors have contributed to the enduring political backlash to civil rights victories in Mississippi over the past five decades, as well as to continued impoverishment of the state of Mississippi, despite the presence of African Americans in county and city governments? Why can't we crack the white barriers to bi-racial voting and progressive politics?

About 2017 and beyond

- What inspiration and/or positive or negative lessons can today's social and racial justice activists take from earlier periods of Black liberation history and labor struggles?
- What are the 21st-century counterparts to the assets of land that Black landowners in Mississippi drew on to be able to advance the 1960s civil rights movement?
- What is the relevance of history in analyzing today's "whitelash" and strategies to ensure that the next few years build the foundation for a "Third Reconstruction" as proposed by Rev. Barber of North Carolina's "Moral Mondays," rather than con-

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New on PRRAC's Website

"Protecting our gains and building a base of practice: PRRAC's housing research and advocacy goals in 2017-18" (January 2017)

Fair housing comments on Treasury Department Notice 2016-77, regarding the Low Income Housing Tax Credit "Concerted Community Revitalization Plan" requirement (February 2017)

Suggested changes to the draft Low Income Housing Tax Credit reform bill (letter to the United States Senate Committee on Finance) (February 2017)

"How Attacks on the Administrative State Can Be Attacks on the Most Vulnerable" by Megan Haberle (March 2017)

"Preserving the Civil Rights Data Collection program" (March 2017)

tinue the march backward analyzed by Philip Klinkner in his 1999 book on the *Rise and Decline of Racial Inequality*?

Recovering the songs and stories of rural civil rights history may help us understand why we are moving forward or backward politically and culturally in the United States today. Black land ownership remains a crucial question going back to the seizure of plantation lands by former slaves during the Civil War, as do struggles ever since to maintain a rural economic base through cooperatives and small farms. Other films have chronicled the Black freedom movement in more well-known struggles from Montgomery to Memphis. *Dirt and Deeds* provides a distinctive and crucial window into a neglected theme of rural organizing, through documentation and interviews with movement veterans in Mississippi's Deep South.

Does this history have lessons for a predominantly urban United States in the age of Trump, when the arrow of history seems to be pointing back to "Jim Crow" acted out on a national stage? Mississippi activist Kali Akuno's thoughts on the road ahead are worth pondering:

I do think in a moment like this, living in Mississippi is an advantage. Mississippi has been dominated by the Tea Party, even before the party had its name. Our governor, Phil Bryant, is a Tea Party member. We have a Republican supermajority and it has been that way for most of the last six years and they can pass almost anything they want. ...

We were like, "Welcome to Mississippi!" to the rest of the United States. We don't wish this on our worst enemies, but this is where we find ourselves. Crying about it or wishing it was different is not going to change the situation. We are going to have to get down, get dirty and struggle and work our way out of this." □

Resources

Web Links

Paragraph on authors

AfricaFocus Bulletin: <http://www.africafocus.org>

No Easy Victories: <http://www.noeasyvictories.org>

Michael Honey: <http://faculty.washington.edu/mhoney/>

Sharecropper's Troubadour: <http://www.palgrave.com/us/book/9780230111271>

Love and Solidarity: <http://www.bullfrogfilms.com/catalog/love.html>

First paragraph in text

Eyes on the Prize episode on Mississippi: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=aP2A6_2b6g8

Dirt and Deeds in Mississippi: <http://newsreel.org/video/DIRT-AND-DEEDS>

Voter suppression: <http://www.noeasyvictories.org/usa/voter-suppression.php>

Second paragraph in text

Holmes County: <http://www.noeasyvictories.org/usa/holmes-county.php> and

<https://www.theguardian.com/us-news/2015/nov/15/poorest-town-in-poorest-state-segregation-is-gone-but-so-are-the-jobs>

Fourth paragraph in text

Robert Clark: https://www.loc.gov/item/afc2010039_crhp0075/

Seventh paragraph in text

Sharecropper's Troubadour

<http://www.folkways.si.edu/magazine-summer-fall-2014-sharecroppers-troubadour-songs-of-solidarity-in-hard-times/article/smithsonian>

Eighth paragraph in text

Carrie Dilworth: <https://snccdigital.org/people/carrie-dilworth/>

About 2017 and beyond

Third Reconstruction: <http://amzn.to/2gfr2Eq>

Rise and Decline of Racial Inequality: <http://amzn.to/2i5qS01>

Kali Akuno: <http://www.truth-out.org/opinion/item/39061-insights-from-mississippi-on-organizing-in-a-right-wing-context-a-conversation-with-kali-akuno>