

Newspaper story led to Beckwith's third trial

Special to Sentinel-Voice
JACKSON, Miss. — Justice delayed.

More than 30 years after the assassination of Medgar Evers, Byron De La Beckwith, the man accused of slaying the civil rights activist in 1963, was finally brought to justice.

It might not have happened at all if a newspaper had not learned that the state's now-defunct segregationist spy agency, the Mississippi Sovereignty Commission, probably kept Beckwith out of prison by tampering with jurors.

On Tuesday, under a federal court order, the public got its first broad look at the commission, a shadow agency that used intimidation, extortion and misinformation to smear its civil rights foes.

A 37-year-old state field director for the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People, Evers was shot in the back as he walked from his car to his house on June 12, 1963.

His wife and young children found him lying in a pool of blood, clutching T-shirts with the slogan "Jim Crow Must Go."

According to authorities, Beckwith's fingerprint was found on a deer rifle abandoned in a lot across the street.

But the former fertilizer salesman insisted that he was 90 miles away in Greenwood when Evers was murdered.

Two all-white juries in 1964 were unable to reach verdicts against Beckwith, an avowed white supremacist.

Twenty-five years later, however, a reporter began

investigating after the commission's documents were leaked to his newspaper, *The Clarion-Ledger* of Jackson. Subsequent stories revealed that the Sovereignty Commission had tampered with the jury in Beckwith's second trial.

The series also led to the conviction and a life sentence for Beckwith, now ailing at age 77.

Although some of the commission's secrets have been revealed, the remaining records might still contain provocative and painful information about Mississippi's racist past.

On Oct. 1, 1989, *The Clarion-Ledger* reported that the state had investigated possible jurors for Beckwith's second trial.

It said contact was made with potential jurors to get biographical information.

That first story was enough to get the attention of Hinds County District Attorney Bobby DeLaughter who conducted an arduous, often difficult investigation without the benefit of the district attorney's file or a trial transcript to know who the witnesses were.

The evidence, normally retained by the court, was nowhere to be found.

His office stumbled across new evidence, like negatives from the crime scene, and new witnesses who testified Beckwith had bragged to them "about beating the system."

When Beckwith went on trial for the third time in January 1994, eight of the 12 jurors were black.



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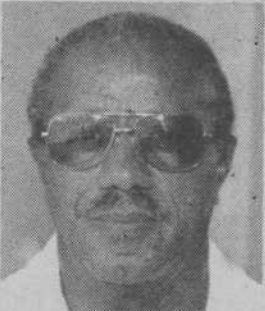


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