

VOICES FROM THE MISSISSIPPI HILL COUNTRY

The Benton County Civil Rights Movement



Roy DeBerry, Aviva Futorian, Stephen Klein, and John Lyons

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Chapter 1

BEGINNINGS

The early years of the twentieth century in Benton County were a particularly difficult time for black residents. The specter of Jim Crow, a series of laws that mandated segregation, loomed large. Lynching was a constant threat. Sharecropping, the system of white landowners renting land to black residents for payment in crops, drove blacks deeper into debt and made them more dependent. Blacks were faced with numerous hurdles to vote, including a poll tax, a Constitution test, and openly bigoted registrars. Black schools had far fewer resources than white schools. Work was hard, the days very long, and prospects for a better future were dim. But in the following people are found the beginnings of Benton County's civil rights movement.

Sarah Robinson

1916–2008

Interviewed November 2004, Michigan City, Mississippi, by Aviva Futorian and John Lyons

Ms. Robinson was a founding member of the Benton County Citizens Club and a section captain in the Michigan City chapter. Though born in Benton County, she was raised in Tennessee, where she worked as a sharecropper, among other jobs. She returned to Benton County as a young woman, worked for a period in Arkansas and Memphis, Tennessee, and came back for good in 1959, eventually inheriting land from her father. She was very active in Benton County, particularly around the issue of voting and distributing the movement's Freedom Train newspaper. "Oh, honey," she told us. "I gave 'em to everybody." She welcomed us into her home, and we had the following conversation in her living room.



My mother passed away in 1920, I understand, and a first cousin wanted a child. So my daddy let her have me. I grew up in Fayette County, Tennessee. I returned to Benton County in '34, I believe. I had grew up and got to be eighteen years old. It was what I thought to be a mean lady that reared me and I decided that I wasn't going to take no more whippins, and I decided to come back to Benton County and stayed with my brother and sister-in-law. We day-worked.

Interviewer: *How did that work?*

[Laughs.] Poorly, honey, poorly. Poorly! I'm tellin' you! We had to get up early and we had to stay late. The men had to get up and be at the barn at 5:00 a.m. Field work, choppin' cotton, honey, till twelve. Come in and hurry up and eat

dinner, if there was anything to eat, and then go on out again. It'd be just about dark when we come in from the field.

My husband and I sharecropped. We were credited for fifty cents a day. We didn't get no money. The government was givin' out commodities.¹ And when we lived over there on this man's place, Marvin Curtis, we was supposed to be getting commodities. Then one time, he carried them up in his truck and each one got his own. All the other times Curtis got the commodity and put it in the storeroom. And we had to buy it from him.

Oh, honey, it wasn't easy. But somehow or another, we made it. We made it through. And, in 1941 I left there, both me and my husband, and went to Arkansas and was workin' by the day there. It was better there than it was here. We got commissary. Back then you didn't get money. Money went to the boss. The boss man gave us food from the commissary.

Interviewer: *When you moved back to Benton County, you inherited your father's land?*

Our dad, yeah. I think it worked out very well. I didn't know how many acres we had 'cause we did it in strips. We had twenty acres down there, sixteen over there, five and one-eighth over here, and twelve down there.

Interviewer: *Where did your father get his land from?*

From his forefather. Our grandfather, he came from Sussex County, Virginia,² I believe, and his wife came from Dinwiddie County, Virginia. They were slaves. The land, the slave master gave it to him, I guess.



Interviewer: *What first got you interested in civil rights?*

Oh child, that votin'. The *voting*. Henry Reaves, he would come to our church and then he would have meetings and we would meet at different churches. He would tell us, "It's good to be a citizen. Vote. So you can have some voice." And that got me to thinkin' about it. And I wanted to be a citizen. Yeah, I wanted to be a citizen. So I can be considered somebody!

[Sighs.] Lawson Mathis.³ We had to go to Oxford a time or two on him, you know. His friends and his colleagues, they would come down the hall yellin'. And we'd look up at him, and he'd cut his eye at us. I didn't pass the first time, I don't know whether I passed the second time. But I *passed*.



Sarah Robinson, during a visit a few years after our conversation. Courtesy of Aviva Futorian.

My first contact [with the 1964 summer volunteer civil rights workers], I was hearin' about this Robert Moses.⁴ He got people, young people from all over the States, I believe. I don't know where they met at, but they tell me he got them together and they talked. And he told them, you know, the consequences. What could or would happen. Them three boys—Goodman, Chaney, and Schwerner.⁵ I remember their killin', that was a senseless killin'. But they was willin' to take the chance. You know, they were just killin' for nothin'. For nothin'. You didn't have to do somethin', you know, to get messed up or maimed, or beat up or killed, you know? You didn't have to do very much to get killed.

Interviewer: *Did you ever think of pulling out of the movement?*

No! Being in it felt so *good*. I didn't think about pullin' out. Being in it was so good.

I was kinda skittish, though. I didn't know if they were gonna throw a bomb, or shoot in the window. I didn't know, but I just kept God in my heart and mind 'cause I'm a great believer in the Bible. Lucky and blessed we are to come out alive, because so many of them were killed. So many were killed.

It's better than it was back then, I can tell you that. A whole lot better. Just the atmosphere. You have to watch them [white people] to make them do right. Mr. Reaves, he said, "You have to watch them. You have to *make* them do right. They ain't gonna do right on their own." That's what Mr. Henry Reaves said. He was right, too.

Jessie Mae Epps

1919–2019

Interviewed April 2007, Michigan City, Mississippi, by Aviva Futorian, Roy DeBerry, and John Lyons

The granddaughter of enslaved people, the hardships of Ms. Epps's ancestors are emblematic of the effort by her family to make a better life for themselves in the hills of north Mississippi. Her family was able to secure a significant amount of land earlier, which gave her a sense of freedom and independence. Ms. Epps was very active in the movement. She attended most meetings and made many attempts to register to vote before succeeding in the 1960s. She was Sarah Robinson's sister, and the following conversation took place in her kitchen.



My grandfather was Edmund Moore and he came from Sussex County, Virginia. I don't know the year. It's on his tombstone. And he walked here, I believe he said it took him six months to get here. He was a slave. It was my understanding he got his land through his master. They said it was about six hundred acres, and it was distributed among his children when he died.

I've done it all. I plowed, I chopped, I picked cotton, I pulled corn, I hauled corn, and I hoed. It was rough. You got up early in the morning and you milked the cows. After you milked the cows you got ready and you moved to the field. And you worked until about eleven, eleven thirty and you came back to the house and you ate lunch. Then at about one you went back out to the fields and you worked until sundown or after sundown, at least. School terms were short for us during those days. We had about four months out of the year for the black children to go to school.⁶ It was kind of split up because you got to

school a while then you have the school closed down and you'd have to harvest the crop. Then you go back to school.

Interviewer: *What are your first memories of the difference between blacks and whites?*

Let me see, how can I put this. We weren't raised around white children. We weren't raised around any at all. And we went to an all-black school, and I didn't see any of the white children. There wasn't any in the community, I didn't go to school with any, wasn't seeing any in the church. So I just didn't see any white children.

I'll tell you the truth—my father didn't talk certain things around children. There's just certain things he just didn't bring up. If you heard anything about it, you heard it from someone else because we didn't have no television at that time. You had to hear it through the grapevine. I can remember when I was a girl, there were three black men hung over here on number 5 [Highway 5]. I can remember hearing the discussions that the sheriffs said they could never find out who done it. They could never find out, so they said. Well, it looked like to me that it was just a little strange. And I can remember a black man was found somewhere in a pond in the county, dead. And they said they never could find out who done it. And you know, it looked like to me that they could find out *something*.



I wanted to register and I wanted to vote. My oldest brother, he was registered. At that time, I think you had to pay two dollars, four dollars. Somethin' you had to pay.⁷ I went to register and they gave me a form to fill out. Civil rights hadn't begun, hadn't come in yet at that time. And I believe there was a man named Mathis in there, at that time. And he gave me a form to fill out. And I don't know if I failed on the form or what. I didn't feel good. So few blacks was registered. So few. One here, there, and yonder was registered at that time. But I didn't try anymore until later years in the civil rights movement, and I didn't have any trouble. I did finally register.

I thought it was nice for them [civil rights volunteers] to come in here. But they wasn't welcome among white people. The black people welcomed them with open arms, but they wasn't welcomed by the white people. And the churches began to burn: Everetts Chapel and Union Hill. I'll be honest and tell you the truth, I was a little afraid sometimes, depending on where the meeting was. It looked like the group was pushing forward and I didn't want to be a "Tom."⁸

So, if I could do anything to help the cause I sure wasn't going to hinder it. And so I went along. I wasn't upfront but I was a strong supporter.

Interviewer: *You didn't have that kind of fear?*

No, I didn't. I know it could have happened. I remember we had a meeting once, out here at our church. We didn't go to that one because we didn't have transportation at the time. We would have had to walk. We would have walked a public road a piece and we would have turned and then crossed a field to the church. But there were so many people passing that it was almost like a funeral procession that night. And we didn't go. I kind of hate that we missed it, but we didn't go. Because we would have had to walk, and we just didn't go.

Interviewer: *Would you do it again?*

Yes, I would. Let's see, how do I put this? There was nothing for blacks to do but to go to the field. You go to school, you go to field, you go to church, you go to Sunday school, that was it. I believe a lot of our people now are enjoying the fruits of what it produced. There's some peoples in their own houses today that wouldn't have been where they been. And some of them are sitting in offices now who probably would not have been in offices if it had not been for the civil rights movement.

About the Editors



Courtesy of Roy DeBerry

Roy DeBerry

A native of Holly Springs, Mississippi, Roy grew up with ten siblings and attended a “Rosenwald” school. He is the executive director and one of the founders of the Hill Country Project. He was active in the civil rights movement in the 1960s, first as a Freedom School student (whose teacher was Hill Country cofounder Aviva Futorian) and then as a general organizer. Roy earned his bachelor’s degree in sociology at Brandeis University in 1970. Before continuing

education at Brandeis, Roy spent a year studying at the University of Ife, Ile Ife, Nigeria. Back at Brandeis in 1972, he earned a master’s degree and later a doctorate in political science in 1978. He has also pursued additional studies at Jackson State University, Duke University, Carnegie-Mellon University, the University of Michigan, and Harvard. He also taught at Rust College, was academic dean at Mississippi Industrial College, both in Holly Springs and Jackson State. Roy is certified to teach at the high school level, and has extensive administrative management experience. Roy believes firmly in education and strongly in a collaboration among education, human service, faith-based organizations, and the business community. He also works to expand parent, community, alumni, and business support for higher education. Active in many community, civic, and professional organizations, Roy has received numerous awards and has been cited for outstanding achievements and contributions. Roy recently retired as vice president for economic development and local governmental affairs at Jackson State University. During his administrative tenure at Jackson State, he also served as executive vice president and vice president of external relations. He has a wife, Rubye, and one daughter, Aisha Isoke.



Courtesy of Aviva Futorian

Aviva Futorian

Aviva is presently a lawyer in Chicago working on prison reform issues in Illinois, with a focus on long-term prisoners. She grew up in Chicago and received her BA at Brandeis University. She taught high school in Park Forest, Illinois, for three years before coming to Mississippi as part of Freedom Summer. After working as a freedom schoolteacher in the summer of 1964, she became an organizer for the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee (SNCC)

in Benton County for two years. After leaving Mississippi, she went to law school and received her JD from the University of Chicago, worked as a legislative assistant for Congresswoman Elizabeth Holtzman, became director of the Women's Law Project of the Chicago legal services program, and represented death-sentenced defendants in Illinois in their final appeals. She first met Hill Country Project executive director Roy DeBerry when he was her freedom school student in 1964. They worked together in Benton County in the 1960s, and have both maintained close contact with Benton County residents during the intervening years. Aviva was also among the first organizers to initiate oral history interviews in Benton County in 1995.



Courtesy of Stephen Klein

Stephen Klein

Stephen worked with the US Agency for International Development from 1963 until he retired in 1990. He began his career working on economic development issues in Africa for fifteen years. He then served as USAID Energy Policy Advisor, and subsequently lived in Morocco for five years where he served as energy policy advisor, assisting Morocco in utilizing its abundant use of solar energy, and improving the efficiency of the country's energy use. Stephen

was a member of US delegations for the UN Conference on New and Renewable sources held in Nairobi, Kenya in 1981, and at the UN Conference on Environment and Development (UNCED) held in Rio de Janeiro in 1992. He lives in Washington, DC, where he has been an active participant for many

years in community affairs, including mentoring local school children. Stephen attended Cornell University (BA) and the University of Chicago Graduate School of Business (MBA).



Courtesy of John Lyons

John Lyons

John is an Emmy Award-winning documentary filmmaker and a teaching artist, who has been making films with students in the Chicago area for over nine years. John has worked with young people in the Chicago Public School System, various community arts centers, and Snow City Arts, an arts education organization dedicated to working with hospitalized children. He is a graduate of Columbia College Chicago and currently works at Marwen, a Chicago nonprofit

that provides free visual arts education to underserved public school students. His first trip to Mississippi was in the fall of 2003, and he has made over thirty subsequent trips to capture these stories.

