The Real Mississippi
By Mark A. Chinn
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What kind of place is it that places the death of a local doctor on the top of the front page of the paper? What kind of man inspires that kind of tribute, even in a small town? Why do people live in small town Mississippi, particularly places like McComb, Mississippi, where the population has not changed since 1900? When I decided to live in Mississippi 30 years ago, I thought I knew the answer. I must admit, that I have often questioned that decision and at this point in my life I was questioning myself a lot on why I had not chosen to live in one of the more exotic places, such as Fort Lauderdale, or San Diego, or San Francisco. But, on this afternoon, as I stood a few feet away from the casket of this local doctor and watched literally hundreds of people pass by in respect, I knew deep in my heart why this place, called Mississippi is *sacred ground.*

A little about me; my Dad was an engineer for the IC Railroad and he was stationed in McComb when I was born in 1953. McComb was a sleepy southern town where the railroad was the biggest employer. Though both of my parents were from the north, "Yankees," they were welcomed to McComb like family. My parents loved it there. In 1959, though, my Dad was transferred to Chicago and that is where I was to live until I began college. But during the summer, I would board the train and head to McComb to spend a month with my oldest friends and former back door neighbors, The Mayers.

When I would get off the train in McComb, the heat would hit me like a brick. It was like there was no oxygen in the air. There to greet me were my friend John Mayer and his Mother, Madge. Madge is a beautiful woman, and, even though I was only a young boy then, her figure was, and still, one to be admired.

John's first words to me when I got off the train were, 'Hey Mork (he never said, "Mark") are you steel a Rebel?" I would say, "Hell yes!" And he would say, "You better be or I'll beat yo head in." As I stayed during the summer and would be introduced again to old friends or new friends through John, the same ritual was repeated: "Where you from boy?" "Chicago, I would say, but I'm really from here." "Well, if you're not a Rebel," they would say, "I'll beat yo head in." Well, no one ever beat my head in. As a matter of fact, after the obligatory salute to Rebeldom, I was accepted like one of their family.

The Mayer's house was a long ranch style house by a small lake called, "I.C. Lake." The house seemed to me to stretch on and on forever. It needed to be big because the Mayers had five children. Four of them were boys and they were all tough, it seemed. The two older boys were Bill and Hank and they occupied their own room. No one passed into their room without fear of death. John and his brother Jimmie occupied the other room and that is where I stayed. Melinda was the youngest and she was and is just as pretty as her Mom; the kind of girl everyone might imagine might come from Mississippi.

The Mayer's home was a strict place. I hardly ever saw Dr. Mayer, I guess because he worked all the time. But he had a military crew cut and he looked tough as a marine drill Sargent to me. There was no fooling around with him, I thought. There was a paddle that hung in the family room. Thirty years later as I sat in that room prior to Dr. Mayer's funeral, I reminded Melinda of that paddle and where it hung. She said, "Oh, you mean the 'Board of Education.'" I recalled to Melinda how one day when I was staying with her family, Jimmie–probably six at the time–inexplicably came out of the shower and stood in the hallway and mooned me. "Mark, look at this," he cackled. Unfortunately for Jimmie, Madge happened to be standing at the other end of the hall and witnessed the whole thing. Before he knew, Jimmie was snatched up and hauled down to the place where the Board of Education hung. I don't need to recount what happened next. I didn't see it but I hear it and I knew what it was!

Summers in McComb were like no other place. To me, it was paradise. We ran around the entire city–it seemed–unsupervised and unafraid. My memory is a clear as yesterday of donning cut off jeans and white tee shirts and running barefoot from the Lake–where we usually played war–to friend's houses. The doors were never locked. The windows were screened and left open at night. I can still hear the sound of screen doors popping as we ran into someone's house and then out again in a pack.

My visits to McComb took place in the tumultuous early 60's. I was really too young to appreciate what was going on. But on one trip, my friend John told me he wanted to show me something. It was a scorched piece of burlap. I said, "What is that?" He replied, "Its from the cross the Klan burned in our front yard. Here, let me show you the pictures." I was aghast. "What is this," I asked, "why did they burn a cross in your yard. I know they do that to black people." John explained that his Dad had taken a strong stand against what was going on in McComb and the Klan didn't like him for it and they were trying to scare them. John said they were kind of scared but their Dad said he was going to stick to what was right.

For my entire adult life I had the image of the ever absent Dr. Mayer as the tough drill sargent. Later in life, I started receiving hand written Christmas cards from him with sentimental recounts of what was going on with the Mayers and congratulating me on good things going on with me. I was surprised by this, but learned at his funeral that he was renowned in his family and community for taking the time to send personal, hand written notes, a practice seemingly lost in today's society.

Now, some 40 years after being shown the scorched burlap from the burned cross, I stood again in McComb at the scene of Dr. Mayer's funeral. His family treated me not just as family but as a most honored guest. I stood back and watched person after person file by. After they would pass through the line of Mayers, many of these people would look at me and walk over. When I would say who I was, they would miraculously remember me and my parents from 50 years ago. They would say, "Oh, you are Rollin and Ann's boy." Or, "I remember when you were a little boy. You were the skinniest boy I ever saw." Or, "Your Dad was the finest man I ever knew."

Why did these people remember me? Why did they care? Why did hundreds of people file by the funeral of a doctor, **who was from Ohio,** and who took a lonesome and courageous stand

against segregation? And it hit me. These people lived a life time together. They had served each other. Dr. Mayer had taken care of their injuries and come to their home in the middle of the night when they were sick. One of them had taken care of the other's cars. Another sold everyone the cars. Another owned the movie theaters that everyone went to. Others worked at the railroad together. Another owned the drug store and another was the eye doctor. They lived a lifetime together, served each other, perhaps fought a little with each other, tied cans to the back of each other's honeymoon cars, built careers together, struggled to raise children together, and now, they were facing death together. I had the sensation that all the glitz and glamour of Hollywood could not take the place of an atmosphere like this in humble McComb, where people truly loved each other and lived life as it is meant to be lived. Now I know.

This story is dedicated to Dr. W.T. Mayer, father, husband, doctor, courageous and gentle man.