

2015

Florence Latimer Mars: A Courageous Voice Against Racial Injustice in Neshoba County, Mississippi (1923-2006)

Charles M. Dollar

Follow this and additional works at: <https://aquila.usm.edu/jmh>

Recommended Citation

Dollar, Charles M. (2015) "Florence Latimer Mars: A Courageous Voice Against Racial Injustice in Neshoba County, Mississippi (1923-2006)," *Journal of Mississippi History*. Vol. 77: No. 1, Article 2. Available at: <https://aquila.usm.edu/jmh/vol77/iss1/2>

This Article is brought to you for free and open access by The Aquila Digital Community. It has been accepted for inclusion in *Journal of Mississippi History* by an authorized editor of The Aquila Digital Community. For more information, please contact aquilastaff@usm.edu.

Florence Latimer Mars:
A Courageous Voice Against Racial Injustice
in Neshoba County, Mississippi
(1923-2006)

by Charles M. Dollar

In the years between the 1954 decision of the Supreme Court in *Brown v. Board of Education* and the closing of the Mississippi State Sovereignty Commission in 1974, many black Mississippians defied intimidation, threats of violence, and death to secure justice in the courts, equality in education/opportunity, and the right to vote. Probably many white Mississippians believed a “never, never” opposition to justice for black Mississippians was unsustainable, but their voices were silent. Supporting the rights of black Mississippians would have exposed them to bitter disagreements with fellow employees, friends, and family members; and possibly coercion from the Citizens Council, intimidation by the Sovereignty Commission, and violence on the part of the Ku Klux Klan. Despite these risks, a small but exceptional minority of white Mississippians expressed their opposition to racial injustice in a variety of public venues.¹ Some members of this “small but exceptional minority,” such as the Reverend Will D. Campbell, the Reverend Duncan M. Gray, Ira Harkey, Ed King, Claude Ramsay, Professor James Silver, and Hazel Brannon Smith are well known but others, especially white Mississippi women, are less well-known and their legacy has been all but forgotten.²

Florence Latimer Mars belongs to the latter group. A native-born

¹ The author has identified more than fifty white Mississippians who comprise this exceptional minority.

² Jenny Irons discusses briefly two white Mississippi women, Jane Schutt and Barbara Barnes, in “The Shaping of Activist Recruitment and Participation, A Study of Women in the Mississippi Civil Rights Movement,” *Gender & Society*, Vol. 12, No. 6 (December 1998), 692-709.

CHARLES M. DOLLAR is a retired historian, archivist, and archival educator at Oklahoma State University, the National Archives and Records Administration, and the University of British Columbia.

Mississippian, she was a prosperous cattle farmer, owner of the Neshoba County Stock Yard, and a member of a well-connected family who owned thousands of acres of land in Neshoba County. Until she was almost forty years old, her wealth and family connections gave her an unchallenged position of privilege in Philadelphia, the county seat of Neshoba County. Her questions about the legitimacy of racial segregation were generally known but were largely tolerated because of her position in the community. All this changed in 1964-1965 when she supported the FBI's investigation of the murder of three Council of Federated Organizations (COFO) workers, Michael Schwerner, Andrew Goodman, and James Chaney. Many whites viewed her outspoken opposition to the Ku Klux Klan and support for justice for all Mississippians as a betrayal of whites in Neshoba County. Eventually fellow church members forced her resignation as teacher of the Women's Sunday School Class at the First Methodist Church in Philadelphia. In 1977 Louisiana State University Press published her memoir, *Witness in Philadelphia*, in which she describes growing up with questions about racial equality, the unwillingness of white civic leaders in the 1960s to speak out against the violence of the Ku Klux Klan, and the white community's opposition to the FBI's investigation of the murder of Schwerner, Goodman, and Chaney. She supported the Klan members' trial and conviction.

Mars had a few close friends in Philadelphia. Her college roommate, Betty Bobo Pearson, wife of a Delta cotton plantation owner, shared her views about racial equality but members of Mars's own family, including her mother, disapproved her views about race. Her own sense of identity, moral conviction, and strength of character enabled her to withstand the verbal pressures, economic losses, and physical threats of harm that her views evoked from whites in Neshoba County. She not only survived those harrowing years to tell her story but also later to see her own community acknowledge the injustice black residents of Neshoba County had experienced.

Born on January 1, 1923, Florence Latimer Mars was the only child of Adam Longino Mars, an attorney, and Emily Geneva ("Neva") Johnson Mars, who both came from prosperous pioneer families. The death of her father when she was eleven and her mother's subsequent re-marriage left a void in her life that was filled by spending considerable time with her paternal grandfather, William Henry Mars, whom she called Poppaw. She accompanied him on his inspection of his vast

landholdings (17,000 acres) including timber, farmland, and houses rented to blacks and whites. Frequently, they stopped and visited at a house a black family rented to share a meal. She wondered how black families could be so generous, patient, and humorous despite their dire financial circumstances. She concluded, “it was faith in God and promise of a heavenly reward that was responsible for their good humor and patience.”³ Years later she wondered if this was “a way of acting which was developed over the years by being in the position of a servant without money.”⁴

As a child during family dinner conversations she raised questions about how whites treated blacks in Neshoba County. She wondered how to reconcile claims of white superiority and segregation with the notion of Christian brotherhood that sent Christian missionaries to Africa to save “lost souls.” Her suggestion that “For Colored Only” signs were not right evoked strong family disapproval. Nonetheless, the idea of racial equality was planted in her childhood and flourished over the years to inspire her to speak out years later against racial injustice and violence.⁵ Her belief in racial equality put her at odds not only with members of her family but also with most of the white community. Her ideas on race gave rise to a profound sense of being out of step, “a shoe on the wrong foot.”⁶ In Sunday School at the First Methodist Church she troubled her teachers and friends with questions about segregation, sending Christian missionaries to Africa, and the age of dinosaur bones compared to Biblical creation accounts. Despite her questions, she decided “not to rock the boat over race and religion.”⁷

After graduating from Philadelphia High School in May of 1940, Florence followed in the footsteps of her deceased father and enrolled at Millsaps College, a Methodist college in Jackson, where she met Betty Bobo. She and Betty were Methodists and immediately got along fine, eventually becoming lifelong friends (Betty referred to Mars as “Flossie,” a term of endearment). They both got involved in campus activities, pledged the same sorority (Chi Omega), concentrated on making good

3 Stanley Dearman, “Florence Mars,” in Joan H. Sadoff, ed., *Pieces from the Past: Voices of Heroic Women in Civil Rights* (Fullerton, CA: Itascabooks, 2011), 37.

4 Florence Mars, *The Bell Returns to Mt. Zion* (Philadelphia, MS: Stribling Press, 1996), 54.

5 Dearman, “Florence Mars,” 38.

6 Mars, *The Bell Returns*, 23

7 Mars, *The Bell Returns*, 23.

grades, and played tennis each day.⁸

At the beginning of her sophomore year at Millsaps, Betty had an appendectomy that forced her to drop out of college for a semester. Because Millsaps lacked sufficient faculty or students to repeat first semester courses in the second semester, Betty decided to transfer to the University of Mississippi (Ole Miss) and persuaded Florence to come too so they could still be roommates.⁹ They found the Ole Miss environment more open than the Millsaps campus with its emphasis on Biblical fundamentalism, including mandatory chapel attendance. They shared the same views about race, segregation, and religion, so they spent long hours reflecting on the challenges they faced in conforming to the expectations of parents, grandparents, and friends.

Mars increasingly struggled with the validity of Jim Crow laws. In her senior year at Ole Miss she traveled by bus from Oxford to Pontotoc to board a train bound for New Orleans. The bus was packed, and all “colored seats” were occupied. Seated in the last row before the sign “For Colored Only,” “I ignored my intellect and followed the dictates of my conscience.” She invited a black woman loaded with packages to take the empty seat beside her. At first the woman declined, but at Mars’s insistence she sat down. Shortly, the bus came to a stop and the driver came to the seat, pulled the woman up, and yelled, “You know better than this.” The driver did not speak to Mars, who wanted to tell him that she, not the black woman, was at fault, but she did not.¹⁰ Embarrassed and humiliated, the woman moved to the back of the bus.

After graduation from Ole Miss, Bobo enlisted in the Marine Corps, and Mars got a job at Delta Airlines in Atlanta, Georgia, where she provided logistical support for ferry pilots who moved airplanes across the country. Atlanta was much larger than Jackson, Mississippi, and Memphis, Tennessee, two cities she had visited, and she enjoyed life in Atlanta visiting with friends and relatives when they came to the city. Soon after the war in Europe ended she returned to Philadelphia.

Mars went to work for the Neshoba County Welfare Office as a home visitor but quit after a year to assist Poppaw in managing some aspects of his large holdings of timberland, farmland, and rental housing. In 1947 her uncle died, and she took on the full-time task of working with

⁸ Telephone interview with Betty Pearson, June 12, 2012.

⁹ *Ibid.*

¹⁰ Mars, *The Bell Returns*, 30

her grandfather as he began disposing of this property. About this time Poppaw deeded to her a cotton farm that had some of the richest soil in Neshoba County. Mars decided to convert the land into a cattle farm where she could begin building a pure-bred Herford herd. In late December 1949, Poppaw became very ill and died three months later. Mars managed the settlement of his estate.

During these years, she revived her interest in photography, a hobby that had been dormant since spending three summers in North Carolina camp as a teenager where she learned to develop and print negatives.¹¹ She purchased a Rolleiflex camera and stocked a darkroom with photographic equipment and supplies so she could develop negatives and produce prints. She kept her camera in her car and took photographs as she drove around Neshoba County.

In the summer of 1950 Mars enrolled in a painting class at an Ole Miss Summer Art School conducted on the Mississippi Gulf Coast, where she studied with artist Fred Conway of St. Louis, Missouri. She learned to project her imagination as paintings but quickly extrapolated this to ordering her imagination through her camera. In the fall of 1950 she relocated to New Orleans and found an apartment in the French Quarter. Shortly thereafter, she met Ralston Crawford, a world traveler, noted abstract artist, lithographer, photographer, and jazz expert, who came to New Orleans from time to time to photograph the jazz scene. He became Mars's mentor, teaching her to photograph jazz parades and she acquired more technical skill in composing photographs. She also attended exhibits of Crawford's paintings in New Orleans and New York City, all of which helped introduce her to a world that lay far beyond the confines of Neshoba County.¹² She visited Crawford and his family in New York City several times and stayed in touch with him over the years, acquiring some of his paintings.¹³

Another significant development occurred in New Orleans: Mars began weekly psychotherapy sessions, which continued over the next three and a half years at Oschner's Clinic. The sessions helped her resolve some childhood conflicts, including her repression of thoughts and ideas about race and religion that had angered members of her family and friends. In addition, the sessions helped her learn to follow

¹¹ Mars, *The Bell Returns*, 26

¹² Mars, *The Bell Returns*, 42.

¹³ Dawn Lee Chalmers to Charles Dollar, December 5, 2014, email.

thought processes to their logical conclusions and then stand firm on them. Years later she observed that the psychotherapy sessions had given her the strength and resolve to withstand the pressures of the Klan and others to conform to their expectations.¹⁴

In 1954, Mars returned to Philadelphia with a clear sense of purpose; she adopted Fred Conway's advice to "follow the things close to your heart" by using her cameras to document day-to-day life of blacks in Neshoba County. Many of these photographs were of black children playing or picking cotton and of adults working, relaxing, napping, eating at family and community events, and socializing in their houses and churches. On one occasion, she took photographs of each step in a "hog killing" by Frank Davis, the husband of Gertrude Davis, her domestic help.¹⁵ It was during this period she began using her camera as if it were an extension of her eyes. This was especially manifested in the darkroom where "Sometimes I spent more than a day with one negative, working on one face, trying to get the results I wanted."¹⁶

The murder of Emmett Till and his killers' trial in late summer of 1955 reinforced her sense of the injustice that blacks in Mississippi endured. Fourteen-year-old Emmett Till from Chicago was visiting relatives in Tallahatchie County when he was alleged to have flirted with a young white woman. Subsequently, two white men kidnapped him from his relatives' home. Several days later his decomposed body was pulled from the Tallahatchie River. The two kidnappers, who made little secret of what they had done, were arrested and charged with Till's murder.

The trial was set to take place in Sumner, Mississippi, a small town in Tallahatchie County where the body was discovered. Mars's college roommate, Betty Bobo, now married to William Pearson, a large cotton plantation owner near Sumner, invited her to attend the trial with her. Community mores in small Mississippi towns dictated that ladies were not supposed to show an interest in such matters as a murder trial where "You will hear things that no white lady should hear."¹⁷

¹⁴ Mars, *The Bell Returns*, 42. The psychotherapy sessions must have been a very private matter for Mars because Lynn Eden, who lived in the same house with her for more than a year while working on the *Witness in Philadelphia* manuscript, recalled years later that Mars never mentioned the sessions to her.

¹⁵ Mars, *The Bell Returns*, 53-54.

¹⁶ *Ibid.*, 55.

¹⁷ Betty Pearson, "Betty Pearson," in Joan H. Sadoff, ed., *Pieces from the Past: Voices of Heroic Women in Civil Rights* (Fullerton, CA: Itascabooks, 2011), 26.

However, they ignored all of this and attended all five days of the trial. This incident was part of an emerging pattern in which Mars rejected community expectations dictating her behavior. She caught a glimpse of the challenges she could face in asserting her independence when two New York Times reporters, whom she had met during the trial, visited her in Philadelphia, and rumors began to circulate that she was a member of the NAACP.¹⁸

In 1957, the Neshoba County Stockyards came on the market, and Mars purchased it to complement her cattle farm. She thought she needed an investment someone else could manage for her while she was out of Neshoba County.

After the Supreme Court decision in *Brown v. Board of Education*, the rising tide of militant white racism, the emergence of the Citizens Council, and the state's funding of the Sovereignty Commission troubled her greatly, so she began spending more time in New Orleans where she continued her photographic work, taking numerous photographs of marching bands in the city. In the summer of 1957 she joined an eight-week tour of Europe organized under the auspices of the Art Department of the University of Alabama. The tour further expanded her understanding and appreciation of a world beyond Neshoba County and nurtured her growing concerns about a pending race relations crisis in Mississippi.

In the fall of 1959 Mars enrolled in a photography class at Tulane University. Class participation included access to a darkroom in one of the university buildings, and she began taking photographs of night life in the French Quarter. In her work as a volunteer with the Jazz Project at the Tulane University Library, she sometimes took William "Bill" Russell, the foremost expert on New Orleans jazz, (who did not drive) to various locations across the city. Frequently their drives included visits to the homes of elderly jazz musicians. She always had two or three cameras with her, so she took many photographs.

Mars's photographs of impromptu jazz sessions led to her involvement in the creation of Preservation Hall. In addition, her skills in composition along with her expertise in developing and printing negatives were being recognized. As part of its urban expansion, New Orleans was destroying old, historic buildings, and Mars was commissioned to

¹⁸ Florence Mars, *Witness in Philadelphia* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1977), 69.

take photographs of these houses and to document their neighborhoods. Later she said taking these pictures and developing negatives and prints gave her a profound sense of satisfaction that enabled her to “forget about the uproar back in Neshoba County over the race issue”¹⁹

In the summer of 1962 Mars and a friend traveled by car through six European countries trying, as she put it, to focus on exploring “the roots of the Western Civilization without any thoughts of Mississippi.”²⁰ However, in early October she saw the front page of an Italian newspaper with a picture of the Lyceum on the Ole Miss campus and the word “morte,” so she knew someone had been killed but did not know who or why. Several days later, while in Greece, she learned about “The Riot at Ole Miss,” but she tried to put this news “in the back of her mind and get on with the exploration of the wonders of the World.”²¹ By late November Mars was back in New Orleans where she concluded that being an absentee owner of a cattle farm and stockyard was not working well. She decided to return to Philadelphia to take personal charge of her cattle farm and stockyard sales lot. In January 1963 she relocated permanently to Philadelphia.

Photography still was an important part of her life so she wanted to continue using her camera as she drove through Neshoba County, taking pictures of people and scenes of interest to her, especially those relating to blacks. However, she found something had changed, and she no longer derived the same level of satisfaction from photography. The easy relationship many white people had with black people was becoming a relic of the past. Whites no longer talked with blacks when they met on the streets lest someone think they were supporting integration.²² Much of this, she thought, could be explained by white militants who were committed to the preservation of white supremacy and the suppression of any action or view that deviated from it. Mars’s interest in taking pictures of blacks raised eyebrows, but no one ever challenged her although her mother asked her, “Why don’t you make some pictures of white people and the nice houses?”²³

Offsetting this development was her new interest in the First Meth-

¹⁹ Mars, *The Bell Returns*, 55.

²⁰ *Ibid.*, 59.

²¹ *Ibid.*

²² Andrew Yates, “Class of 64,” (Los Angeles: Unpublished Historical Documentary Video, 1974). Copy in possession of the author.

²³ Mars, *The Bell Returns*, 47.

odist Church. Since graduating from Ole Miss, she had little interest in organized religion. However, on one of her trips to Philadelphia she had met the Reverend John Cooke, pastor of First Methodist Church, who persuaded her that the church of her childhood had changed. As she put it later, “the increasing racial tensions in the state, my very strong desire to take a stand, and my belief that the church offered the best hope as a moderating influence helped me to decide to become active.”²⁴

Through conversations with the Reverend Cooke, Mars developed a renewed interest in religion and began participating in the activities of the church. Soon she was invited to become the teacher of the Women’s Bible class on Sunday mornings. Initially, she found teaching the Bible class very satisfying, reading widely to supplement church literature. But she also found it frustrating because no one in the class, or in the church for that matter, seemed interested in talking about race relations in Neshoba County, the murder of Medgar Evers, or the four Negro girls who were killed by a bomb in their Birmingham, Alabama, church.

Inspired by the January 1963 “Born of Conviction” statement of twenty-eight Mississippi Methodist ministers, who believed clergy had a responsibility for leadership in race relations, she decided to add her voice to their plea for reason and moderation about race relations in the Methodist Church in Mississippi.²⁵ Advocates of the “Born of Conviction” statement soon were under fire from a majority of Mississippi Methodist ministers and churches, some of whom rejected the notion that ministers and churches had a role in combatting racial injustice and others who supported “The Closed Society.” This conflict played out in many Methodist churches in Mississippi, but especially in the First Methodist Church of Philadelphia in the aftermath of the murder of the three COFO workers in June of 1964,

By the beginning of 1964 it was widely recognized that the Ku Klux Klan was burning crosses in Mississippi. In Neshoba County alone the Klan burned twelve crosses. The Neshoba County sheriff reported that outsiders had burned the crosses and had left before law officials could apprehend them. In March the Council of Federated Organizations (COFO) announced it would send workers to Neshoba County to organize a voter registration drive for black voters. Several weeks later COFO

²⁴ Mars, *Witness in Philadelphia*, 41.

²⁵ Joseph T. Reiff, *Born of Conviction: White Methodists and Mississippi’s Closed Society* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2016).

workers Michael Schwerner and James Chaney were in the Mt. Zion community to begin planning for a voter registration drive and a Freedom School. A community meeting was held at the Mt. Zion Methodist Church. After a few days, Chaney and Schwerner returned to Meridian.

On June 16 a group of Ku Klux Klan members drove to the Mt. Zion Church, viciously beat up several members, and then set the church on fire. Schwerner, who was attending a COFO meeting in Oxford, Ohio, learned of this and immediately drove back to Meridian with the intent of visiting Mt. Zion to obtain more information. Andrew Goodman, a recent recruit, came with him. On Sunday afternoon, June 21, Schwerner, Goodman, and Chaney drove to Mt. Zion to investigate the burning of the church. En route to the church they drove through Philadelphia, where Deputy Sheriff Cecil Price pulled over the station wagon Chaney was driving and charged him with speeding and arrested Goodman and Schwerner for investigation into the church burning. They were taken to the county jail and after Chaney paid a fine of \$20.00 they were released around 10:30 PM and told to get out of the county. Deputy Sheriff Price said he last saw the car headed south on Highway 19. The young men never made it back to Meridian. Three days later their abandoned, burned-out station wagon was discovered twelve miles north of Philadelphia; the three COFO workers were missing.

Most whites in Neshoba County concluded that the absence of bodies meant this was a hoax; COFO had staged their disappearance to make Neshoba County look bad. They now linked the burning of Mt. Zion Church as part of this "hoax." In remarks delivered on June 25, 1964, on the floor of the United States House of Representatives, Congressman William Arthur Winstead (D-MS), whose hometown was Philadelphia, declared "It is the belief of many prominent citizens that this instance is part of a plan to discredit the State of Mississippi. Even the church burning, some people believe, may be a hoax."²⁶

In early July, Mars drove to Meridian with her childhood friend, Iris Turner Kelso, who grew up in Neshoba County and was now a reporter for the New Orleans States-Item. Kelso was covering the disappearance of the three civil rights workers, and she wanted to go to Meridian to investigate the discovery of a torso in the Mississippi River that might be that of James Chaney. Mars volunteered to drive Kelso to the Meridian COFO office. Curious about COFO, she went into the

²⁶ 110 *Congressional Record*, 14997-14998 (1964).

office with her friend, who learned the torso was not that of Chaney. As the two left, a young COFO worker from New York asked Mars if it would be safe for him to go to Neshoba County, and she told him “no.” Unhappy with her response, he asked her, “Do you think you are free?” She told him she was and he responded, “Well you’re not. Somebody got your name and number just as soon as you walked through the door downstairs.”²⁷ Naively believing her standing in Neshoba County gave her immunity, she summarily rejected his assessment. A few days later she learned the Klan had the COFO office under surveillance, and rumors were circulating in Philadelphia that she was attending COFO meetings in Meridian. Afterwards, she discovered she was under daily Klan surveillance in Philadelphia.²⁸ It was a shock to her to learn how vulnerable she had become.

Teams of FBI agents were in Philadelphia investigating leads that the Klan was involved in the murder of the three civil rights workers. Almost without exception, residents of Philadelphia refused to cooperate with the FBI agents. One exception was Mars’s aunt Ellen Spendruff, who was “tough, outspoken, [and] afraid of nothing.” Spendruff had invited FBI agents to visit her in her home where she told them there were a few people in Philadelphia willing to talk with the FBI.²⁹ Several days later two FBI agents came to talk with Mars.

In the meantime, she began speaking with local business leaders about the possible connection between the disappearance of the three civil rights workers and the Klan. She began to suspect no one wanted to publicly challenge Klan leadership, which she believed included Sheriff Lawrence Rainey and his deputy, Cecil Ray Price. She raised her concerns with Tom DeWeese, a family friend, owner of the DeWeese Lumber Company, and one of the most powerful and influential business leaders in Neshoba County.³⁰ He told her he had been too busy with his lumber business to pay much attention to suspicions about increased Klan activity but assured her he would look into it. After a few weeks

²⁷ Thomas Healy, “An Oral History with Miss Florence Mars, Native Mississippi Author,” (The Mississippi Oral History Program of the University of Southern Mississippi, 1981), 23.

²⁸ Healy, “An Oral History with Miss Florence Mars, Native Mississippi Author,” 25.

²⁹ Dearman, “Florence Mars,” 43.

³⁰ Mars does not reference DeWeese by name but a reference to this same individual in an article by Joseph Lelyveld, “A Stranger in Philadelphia, Mississippi,” December 27, 1964, in *The New York Times Magazine* identifies him.

without a follow-up from DeWeese, she realized no civic leader was willing to challenge the Klan. Adding to her concerns were that some people who rejected the disappearance of the three civil rights workers as a hoax were afraid to say so, because “if you said ‘it’s not a hoax’ that put you on the side of COFO.”³¹

The FBI continued its extensive search for the missing civil rights workers, now presumed dead. Based upon tips received from those seeking to claim an award of \$25,000 for information leading to the discovery of the bodies of the three civil rights workers, the FBI began excavation of a recently built earthen dam several miles west of Philadelphia. On August 4, the FBI found the bodies of Michael Schwerner, Andrew Goodman, and James Chaney buried under fifteen feet of dirt at the new dam.

Although this discovery jolted many Neshoba County residents who believed the civil rights workers’ disappearance was a hoax, it did not change the prevailing view that COFO was the underlying cause of violence in the community. When COFO decided to send more civil rights workers to Philadelphia, the Klan organized an effort to drive out COFO by bringing economic pressure on and physically intimidating any black Philadelphia COFO supporters. Seeking community endorsement, the Klan leadership organized a closed meeting in the county courthouse on August 17.

Mars, Aunt Ellen, three other women, two preachers, and two businessmen decided to attend. As the women entered and moved to the back of the room it became totally silent; the presence of the five women was unexpected and unwelcomed. Nonetheless, they were permitted to stay. The ensuing discussion included proposals to prepare a list of local “Negroes who supported COFO” and circulate it to all businesses in Philadelphia. Anyone whose name was on the list would be denied credit and if working would be immediately fired.³² Aunt Ellen surreptitiously took notes of the proposals, discussion, and decisions by pretending to make entries in her checkbook register which she planned to hand over to the FBI.³³ The meeting concluded with the chairman’s admonition that all the decisions made should not be discussed outside the meeting.

In mid-September, Mars learned the FBI had no eyewitnesses to

³¹ Healy, “An Oral History with Miss Florence Mars, Native Mississippi Author,” 25.

³² Mars, *Witness in Philadelphia*, 116.

³³ Dearman, “Florence Mars,” 44.

support indictments for the murders, but it had identified twenty-one instances of prosecutable police brutality. FBI Inspector Joe Sullivan told her that Robert Owen, the Justice Department attorney handling the grand jury hearings, needed the testimony of “responsible white citizens” to challenge the testimony that Sheriff Lawrence Rainey was a “fine sheriff” and that there were no racial problems in Neshoba County until the Council of Federated Organizations “persuaded Negroes to tell lies.”³⁴ Subpoenas were served on Aunt Ellen and Mars to testify at a federal grand jury hearing in Biloxi, which they did on Thursday, October 1. Later Mars reported that she described the courthouse meeting and when asked about Sheriff Rainey’s reputation in dealing with Negroes, she stated that ever since the sheriff took office in January 1964 there had been constant stories of police brutality circulating both in the black and white communities.³⁵

Back in Philadelphia the next day, Mars went to her stockyard and was outraged to learn the Klan knew about her testimony in Biloxi. One of her employees reported that Klan members told him she “had testified against our folks down at the grand jury” and that she was working for COFO. A livestock buyer from Tennessee informed her Klan members told him they were organizing a boycott against sales at the stockyard to close it down. She tried to fight back, but Klan members stopped truck drivers delivering livestock to the stockyard and told them the stockyard was closed. She asked her first cousin, Mont Mars, for advice about what she should do. A recent graduate of the University of Mississippi School of Law, he told her he believed the Klan’s boycott efforts probably would succeed. In apparent agreement with others in the community who believed she had “broken the rules,” he added, “You’ve been asking for trouble and now you’ve got it.”³⁶ Several months later she found a non-Klan buyer and sold the stockyard at a loss. Later, after hearing threats that the Klan planned to poison her purebred Hereford cattle, she sold the farm and the cattle.

Mars heard rumors circulating among friends that she worked for COFO. Indignant that anyone would think she had so little sense of community concerns she would work for COFO, much less be a member, she also was outraged to learn that Clarence Mitchell, a prominent

³⁴ Mars, *Witness in Philadelphia*, 133.

³⁵ *Ibid.*, 135.

³⁶ *Ibid.*, 138.

member of the First Methodist Church and a reputed KKK member,³⁷ was telling church members and others that her testimony before the federal grand jury in Biloxi made her a “traitor to the community,” and he would see to it she paid for it.³⁸

In June of 1964, the Methodist Bishop of Mississippi assigned the Reverend Clay Lee to be pastor of the First Methodist Church in Philadelphia. Rev. Lee looked forward to this assignment because he had just completed a very difficult year as associate pastor of Galloway Methodist Church in Jackson, the largest Methodist Church in the state, where efforts to integrate worship services split the congregation. Several weeks after Rev. Lee’s arrival in Philadelphia, he asked Mars to lead the senior Methodist Youth Fellowship (MYF), which met on Sunday evenings. She agreed to do so but with the proviso, “I’m not just going to take that class if I can’t feel free to teach and bring out whatever I can on whatever subjects we might want to have in open and free discussion.” He assured her this was okay; “That is exactly why I wanted you to have it.”³⁹

During the spring of 1965, the community and church hostility toward her subsided, but it erupted again after a COFO memorial parade on June 21, 1965, the anniversary of the Chaney, Goodman, and Schwerner murders. Mars’s maternal grandfather was ill, and the family hired a black nurse from the Mt. Zion community to tend to his needs. The usual practice was for a family member to drive to Mt. Zion and bring the nurse back to her grandfather’s house where the nurse worked fourteen days and then took off for three days. On the date of the COFO memorial parade it was Mars’s turn to make the run. She drove her familiar 1962 Volkswagen out to Mt. Zion while the parade was still in process, but the highway patrol stopped traffic for a few minutes and then allowed the cars to follow behind the parade. Deputy Sheriff Cecil Price saw Mars and reported to the sheriff’s office she was part of the parade. Within an hour or so a rumor that she was in the parade was viral in Philadelphia, and some church members once again questioned if she should be teaching the Women’s Bible Class. Mars’s troubles continued to mount. The First Methodist Church was across

³⁷ Justice Department, Civil Rights Division, Jackson, n.d. Florence Mars Papers, Philadelphia, Mississippi. Copy in possession of the author.

³⁸ Mars, *Witness in Philadelphia*, 140.

³⁹ Healy, “An Oral History with Miss Florence Mars, Native Mississippi Author,” 32.

the street from the county jail, and during a discussion with the MYF, she asked if they remembered what happened there a year earlier. Everybody remembered, and when she asked why the civil rights workers were killed, several class members said it was because of their ideas. Picking up on a theme discussed the previous week she observed, "Well, you couldn't really say that this is the same thing as killing six million Jews, but there are some similarities."⁴⁰ The parents of some of the MYF members were infuriated when they learned of this discussion because they did not want their children to hear about the killings nor did they want the murders compared to the Holocaust.

Several months later during the Neshoba County Fair, Mars attended a party at the fairgrounds where alcohol was served. She was observed having two drinks, and when she got into her car and started to drive home, Neshoba County Sheriff Lawrence Rainey arrested her for drunk driving. The arrest enraged her because she was not drunk, and witnesses at the party could testify she had only two drinks. There were many other people who drank alcohol that night at the party, but she was the only one arrested. Eventually, the drunk driving charge was dropped, but the damage was done. Her old foe, Clarence Mitchell, soon was asserting that Mars was not fit to teach the Women's Bible Class or the MYF and that the church should ask her to resign. He told Rev. Lee her participation in church affairs was like "putting shit in homemade ice cream."⁴¹ She offered to resign, but Rev. Lee urged her to stay the course, saying he would not want to remain at the church if she resigned.

A Philadelphia, Mississippi to Philadelphia, Pennsylvania Project imbroglio culminated in Mars's resignation in April 1966 as teacher of the Women's Bible Class and leader of the MYF. After learning of the murder of the three COFO workers in Neshoba County, Rudi Gelsey, pastor of the Unitarian-Universalist Church of the Restoration in Pennsylvania, created a Social Concerns Committee to establish a "sister to sister city" exchange program to improve racial relations in Philadelphia, Mississippi.⁴² In January 1965, he visited Mississippi

⁴⁰ Healy, "An Oral History with Miss Florence Mars, Native Mississippi Author," 48.

⁴¹ Yates, "Class of 64."

⁴² William Dikeman, *Restoration After 175: Milestone and Landmarks* (Philadelphia, PA: privately published, 1995), 45. Extract courtesy of Rev. Dr. Kathryn Ellis, Minister of Unitarian-Universalist Church of the Restoration, Philadelphia, PA.

to meet with blacks and whites who might be interested in attending a seminar to develop plans for an exchange program. Among the people he met were Rev. Lee, Mars, and Rev. Clinton Collier, a black pastor of a Methodist Church in Neshoba County, who had the reputation of being “the most militant Negro in the county.”⁴³ Mars became a strong supporter of the Philadelphia to Philadelphia Project, believing it could help break the stranglehold the Klan had on the community.

In May of 1965, Rev. Lee, Rev. Collier, and several other blacks attended a seminar in Pennsylvania that discussed several initiatives, including the promotion of open and equal communication between whites and Negroes of Neshoba County and a student exchange program.⁴⁴ Several months later Rev. Lee received a copy of a brochure the Pennsylvania group had produced to solicit funding for the project. He showed it to Mars, and they agreed its condescending tone, missionary zeal, and prominent mention of the three murders along with two pictures, one a picture of a shack and another of a black and white child playing together would kill the project. They revised the brochure to one page, deleting the condescending tone, the reference to three murders, and the two pictures.

In the meantime, another Philadelphia-to-Philadelphia working session and banquet were scheduled for January 1966. Three whites from Philadelphia, Mars, Rev. Lee, and Robert Carley Peebles, and several blacks, including Rev. Collier, attended the conference and banquet. Peebles (1892 – 1977), a well-respected businessman, civic leader, and former president of the Philadelphia Chamber of Commerce, delivered the keynote speech, “One Government – One Bible – One People,” in which he declared “that the rule of law is perhaps the greatest achievement in the long struggle for liberty, and if that is lost, liberty is lost; that the use of orderly, ‘due process’ to change the laws is essential for an orderly society.”⁴⁵ His speech was not an explicit denunciation of the Klan, but to many residents of Neshoba County the message was clear. The Philadelphia Chamber of Commerce demanded Peebles

⁴³ Mars, *Witness in Philadelphia*, 197.

⁴⁴ Social Concerns Committee, 1964, 1965, 1966, and 1967 annual reports of the Unitarian-Universalist Church of Restoration, Philadelphia, Pa. Extracts of the annual reports are in the possession of the author, courtesy of Rev. Dr. Kathryn Ellis, Minister of Unitarian-Universalist Church of the Restoration. Mars, *Witness in Philadelphia*, 202.

⁴⁵ Copy in possession of the author, courtesy of Peebles’s daughter, Sarah Howell, Philadelphia, Mississippi.

issue a statement saying his speech did not represent the views of the Chamber. He refused.

The only project the Mississippi and the Pennsylvania delegations could agree on was a student exchange program. Initially, the plan was that six white students would come to Philadelphia, three would stay in white homes and three in black homes. Eventually, this was reduced to two white students who would stay in white homes. When the two students arrived in Philadelphia at the beginning of Easter Week, they brought with them copies of the revised brochure with the intention of passing them out to various groups. Unfortunately, local police had discovered copies of the old, unrevised brochure in the car of Rev. Clinton Collier during a routine traffic stop earlier and now they were being circulated in the community. Rev. Collier was associated with COFO, so Rev. Lee and Mars knew whites in Neshoba County would conclude the Philadelphia to Philadelphia Project was a front for civil rights and COFO and that they were working in its behalf. This gave rise to renewed efforts to oust Mars from teaching the Women's Bible Class. Under pressure from their husbands, some members of the class sought her resignation because they were concerned about being associated with communist civil rights agitation. This time Rev. Clay agreed she should resign from teaching the Women's Bible Class and leading the Methodist Youth Fellowship. On April 24, 1966, Mars submitted her resignation.

Concurrent with all the challenges Mars faced in 1965, the National Council of Negro Women repeated an initiative to arrange for interracial and interfaith teams of northern middle and upper class women to come to Mississippi to meet with their southern counterparts. Called Wednesdays in Mississippi (WIMS), team members arrived in Jackson on Tuesdays and left on Thursdays.⁴⁶ In May of 1965, Caroline Smith, who was associated with both the Philadelphia to Philadelphia Project and WIMS, asked Rev. Lee to set up a WIMS meeting in Philadelphia. He asked Mars to coordinate the meeting so Smith came to Philadelphia several times to plan the meeting.⁴⁷ About fifteen white women in Neshoba County attended the WIMS meeting but neither they nor

⁴⁶ Debbie Z. Harwell, *Wednesdays in Mississippi, Proper Ladies Working for Social Change*, Freedom Summer 1964 (Jackson, MS: University Press of Mississippi, 2015).

⁴⁷ Research Notes 1959-1966," Series 1, Papers of Florence Mars, Mississippi Department of Archives and History.

their visitors could agree on a workable program.⁴⁸ Caroline Smith suggested organizing a Philadelphia chapter of “Mississippians for Public Education.” She arranged for Pat Derian, one of the founders of “Mississippians for Public Education” in Jackson, to come to Philadelphia and discuss how the group could organize a local chapter. The chapter took on the task of facilitating the peaceful integration of fifteen black students into previously all-white schools in 1966.

Recognizing that the controversy swirling about her could impede the activities of the chapter, Mars withdrew completely from involvement in these activities. Nonetheless, she stayed in contact with Caroline Smith through correspondence and telephone calls. In one letter to Smith she expressed her appreciation for Smith’s vision and leadership:

The enormity of the challenge . . . here in Philadelphia is slowly but surely making its way into my consciousness. Sometimes you hear the word, you know their definitions; then, bang, you suddenly understand . . . this realization came to me. The means, the methods of achieving results seems obscure to those who have been so long in a frustrating situation without direction. It is the reality of the possibility that came into my consciousness.⁴⁹

In mid-June 1966, Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. was in Mississippi to support James Meredith’s “March Against Fear” after Meredith was wounded in an ambush. A few days later Dr. King came to Philadelphia to participate in the second memorial march commemorating the deaths of Goodman, Chaney, and Schwerner. As he led 150 people to the courthouse square where he intended to make a brief speech, a crowd of white hecklers yelled and screamed at him and tried to prevent him from speaking. Mars later recounted that she was standing at the courthouse as the marchers began their return to Independence Quarter and was stunned as she saw whites she knew throwing rocks

⁴⁸ Wednesdays in Mississippi – 1965, Report from Jean Dillinger, Team #2 – Philadelphia, July 13-15, 1965, Folder 311, Series 19, Records of the National Council of Negro Women Papers, the National Black Women’s Archives, United States National Park Service. Available digitally after consultation with Kenneth Chandler, Archivist of the National Black Women’s Archives.

⁴⁹ Florence Mars to Caroline Smith, July 19, 1965, Wednesdays in Mississippi – 1965, Transcript of Debriefing Team # 2, Folder 311, Series 19, Records of the National Council of Negro Women Papers.

and bottles at King and the marchers.⁵⁰ The local police made no effort to control the mob as it became more violent, especially as Klansmen encouraged others to throw rocks or to attack the marchers with their fists and clubs. All the while she remained on the square, silent and holding high an American flag as though to say, “this is not America.” Dick Molpus, who was fourteen-years-old at the time, recalled later that “Florence Mars stood regally on the court square, holding a huge American flag straight out in front of her with both hands, pushing it as far forward as she could. She didn’t flinch, or look one way or the other, just stared straight ahead.”⁵¹

The trial of the men indicted for the murder of the three civil rights workers had been on hold while government attorneys appealed Judge Harold Cox’s dismissal of most of the charges. In March 1966 the United States Supreme Court unanimously reversed his decisions. However, procedural issues delayed the trial until October 9, 1967. The trial was conducted in Meridian, and Mars and Aunt Ellen attended all sessions.

To the shock of most whites in Neshoba County, on October 20, 1967, an all-white jury of five men and seven women found seven of the defendants guilty and acquitted seven others. Mistrials were declared for three other defendants, including Ku Klux Klan leader Edgar Ray Killen, an ordained Baptist minister, even though there was corroborative testimony he planned the murders. The jury was dead-locked 11 to 1 on Killen’s conviction, the one holdout being a woman who said she could never vote to convict a preacher.

In the aftermath of the white community’s acceptance of rumors that Mars was a COFO supporter and her trumped-up arrest for drunken driving in the summer of 1965, she began thinking about setting things right for her own peace of mind. Rev. Lee asked if she had ever thought about writing a book. She told him, “No, I can’t write, Clay. I can talk but I can’t write.”⁵² He suggested she buy a tape recorder and begin recording her recollections of events over the past two years. She followed his advice, and started recording her recollections, transcribing the recordings into typed notes. She continued this practice over the next year and a half and finished a first rough draft in December 1967.

⁵⁰ Mars, *Witness in Philadelphia*, 207.

⁵¹ Donna Ladd, “In Memory of Florence Mars, 1923 – 2006,” *Jackson Free Press*, May 3, 2006.

⁵² Healy, “An Oral History with Miss Florence Mars, Native Mississippi Author,” 50

She asked Turner Catledge, managing editor of *The New York Times*, who had grown up in Philadelphia with her mother, to read the draft and he told her the draft contained marvelous things and advised her to continue working on it. She followed his advice and over the next year or so produced multiple drafts. In addition, Mars decided to explore the history of the Mt. Zion community and began researching county land records to understand how the community came into being after slaves were freed. There were so many unanswered questions that she began recording interviews with residents of the Mt. Zion community.⁵³

A major problem Mars encountered with the drafts was that she did not want to use footnotes because they involved “looking up this dull stuff.” Several reviewers of the manuscript advised her readers would not necessarily believe what she wrote without documentation. With considerable reluctance, she began documenting some parts of her draft based on issues of *The Neshoba Democrat* and *The New York Times*. At this point, Lynn Eden, a recent graduate of the University of Michigan and author of a forthcoming book based on her senior thesis, joined the project.⁵⁴ From January 1972 until the summer of 1973, Eden stayed in Mars’s house and worked with her in reorganizing the structure of the manuscript, recommending revisions, identifying places where documentation was required, and then locating the appropriate source. Although she was listed on the title page as “with the assistance of Lynn Eden,” Eden rewrote most of the manuscript⁵⁵ that the Louisiana State University Press accepted and published in August 1977 as *Witness in Philadelphia*. It was an alternative selection in the Book of the Month Club and received praise in numerous book reviews. More than 500 copies were sold in Philadelphia alone, but Mars thought most people probably either rejected her description of events during the 1960s or wanted to forget this past, believing nothing could come of stirring up these matters. “Neshoba County whites,” she declared, “are still hostile to any references made to the three civil rights workers and resentful that the press brings the murders up every time anything is written about the community.”⁵⁶

In the 1980s as Neshoba County moved closer to racial tolerance

⁵³ Mars, *The Bell Returns*, 64.

⁵⁴ Lynn Eden to Charles Dollar, December 3, 2014, email.

⁵⁵ *Ibid.*

⁵⁶ Mars, *Witness in Philadelphia*, 281.

and moral and political commitment to the equality and social justice that Mars exemplified, the controversy swirling around her in the 1960s faded away. Now in her 60s, she still drove her old Volkswagen Beetle and remained active in the community. She attended the twenty-fifth anniversary of the murders of Schwerner, Chaney, and Goodman in 1989 where she heard Mississippi Secretary of State Dick Molpus, who grew up in Philadelphia, apologize for the murders on behalf of the community. She was pleased that in 2004 the Philadelphia Coalition, a multi-racial organization committed to racial reconciliation in Neshoba County, rose Phoenix-like from the ashes of the Philadelphia to Philadelphia Project. Doubtless, she derived great pleasure in seeing her second cousin, Dawn Lea Chalmers, become an active member of the coalition.

Mars continued her research and writing. In 1995 she published *The Lake Place Burnside Family History: a Neshoba County history*, which was followed by *The Bell Returns to Mt. Zion* in 1996. The latter is a revealing self-portrait of the complexity of her aspirations and contradictions. It is a stream-of-consciousness narrative in which she explores her own evolving self-awareness, the emotional conflicts she had with her father and his brother William (both of whom were addicted to morphine), her relations with blacks in Neshoba County, and her views on religion.

By 2000 Mars had become less active because of palsy, diabetes, and heart issues. Her health gradually declined to the point where she was in a wheelchair most of the time. Despite this, she enjoyed one last hurrah when justice finally caught up with Edgar Ray Killen in 2005. A state grand jury indicted him on three counts of murder. In early June, the trial opened in Philadelphia, and she was there. Stanley Dearman, the retired editor of *The Neshoba Democrat*, wrote that while spectators were quietly waiting for the trial to begin:

They suddenly became aware of a voice outside the courtroom talking nonstop. The door in the back of the room opened and Florence, still talking, was wheeled in by two attendants. One thing she was heard to say was "I've been with this case too long to miss this."⁵⁷

She was in the courtroom the day the jury delivered a guilty verdict on all three counts.

⁵⁷ Dearman, "Florence Mars," 45.

Florence Latimer Mars died on April 23, 2006. Stanley Dearman had the last word. In remarks at her funeral he reminded the audience that many people who lived in Neshoba County during the 1950s and 1960s now acknowledge that Florence was right all along, but they had forgotten what they said and did more than four decades earlier.⁵⁸

Florence Mars's opposition to social injustice in Neshoba was impelled by a deep need to understand how a community of Christians committed to the teachings of Jesus could remain silent about police brutality and the hatred, violence, and lawlessness espoused by the Klan. She replaced her camera with a tape recorder and a typewriter, determined to be an author and began to write. Like Georgian Lillian Smith, author of *Killers of the Dream* (1949), she had to write "because I had to find out what life in a segregated culture had done to me, one person; I had to put down on paper these experiences so that I could see their meaning for me."⁵⁹

These experiences were almost preordained in the sense that from her childhood she had objected to people telling her what to believe and what she had to do. She once responded to someone who told her she had to do something, "I don't have to do anything but die and I have to live with myself until I do."⁶⁰ In this context, her drive to capture photographic images of blacks, to expose the violence and lawlessness of the Klan, and to call for Christians to practice the teachings of Jesus was a personal journey of overcoming fear and being true to her convictions. Her voice of conscience and conviction could not be silenced, and the publication of *Witness* in Philadelphia in 1977 ensured her voice of conscience would be heard across the United States.

Of course, Mars's voice was not the only voice of conscience among white Mississippi women in the 1960s. Other voices of conscience included Hazel Brannon Smith (Lexington), Jane Schutt (Jackson), Pat Derian (Jackson), Marge Baroni (Natchez), Winifred Green (Jackson), Anne Hewitt (Jackson), Mary Anne Henderson (Jackson), and Elaine Crystal (Jackson). Strong religious convictions that there was a brotherhood of men largely inspired Schutt, Baroni, and Hewitt while the prospect that the state legislature would close public schools rather than accept integration inspired Derian, Green, Henderson, and Crystal to

⁵⁸ Dearman, "Florence Mars," 47.

⁵⁹ Quoted in Mars, *The Bell Returns*, 87.

⁶⁰ Mars, *The Bell Returns*, 67.

create Mississippians for Public Education to promote keeping public schools open. Mars and Smith supported legal rights for blacks and opposed police brutality, the violence of the Klan, and intimidation by the Citizens Council primarily on constitutional and moral grounds. Unlike Mars, Hazel Brannon Smith as editor and publisher of *The Lexington Times* and *The Northside Reporter*, had a state and national venue in which to express her views, which earned her the 1964 Pulitzer prize for editorial writing. Both Mars and Smith faced economic losses because of their views, although Smith suffered greater losses because an economic boycott by the Citizens Council drove her newspaper into bankruptcy, forcing her to move back to her home state of Alabama.

Except for Rev. Lee, Mars's discussions about race relations were largely limited to weekly telephone calls and occasional visits with her lifelong friend Betty Pearson at Rainbow Plantation and conversations with a few very close female friends in Philadelphia. Mars did not have a sanctuary like Rainbow Plantation where she could temporarily escape from the hostility of whites, who considered her a racial agitator, a communist sympathizer, and a threat to society. It required great fearlessness and commitment to her convictions to survive in this environment, which Ken Dean, executive director of the Mississippi Council on Human Relations (1965-1970), affirmed when he described her as one of the most courageous people he had ever met.⁶¹

⁶¹ Ken Dean to Charles Dollar, December 18, 2016, email.

