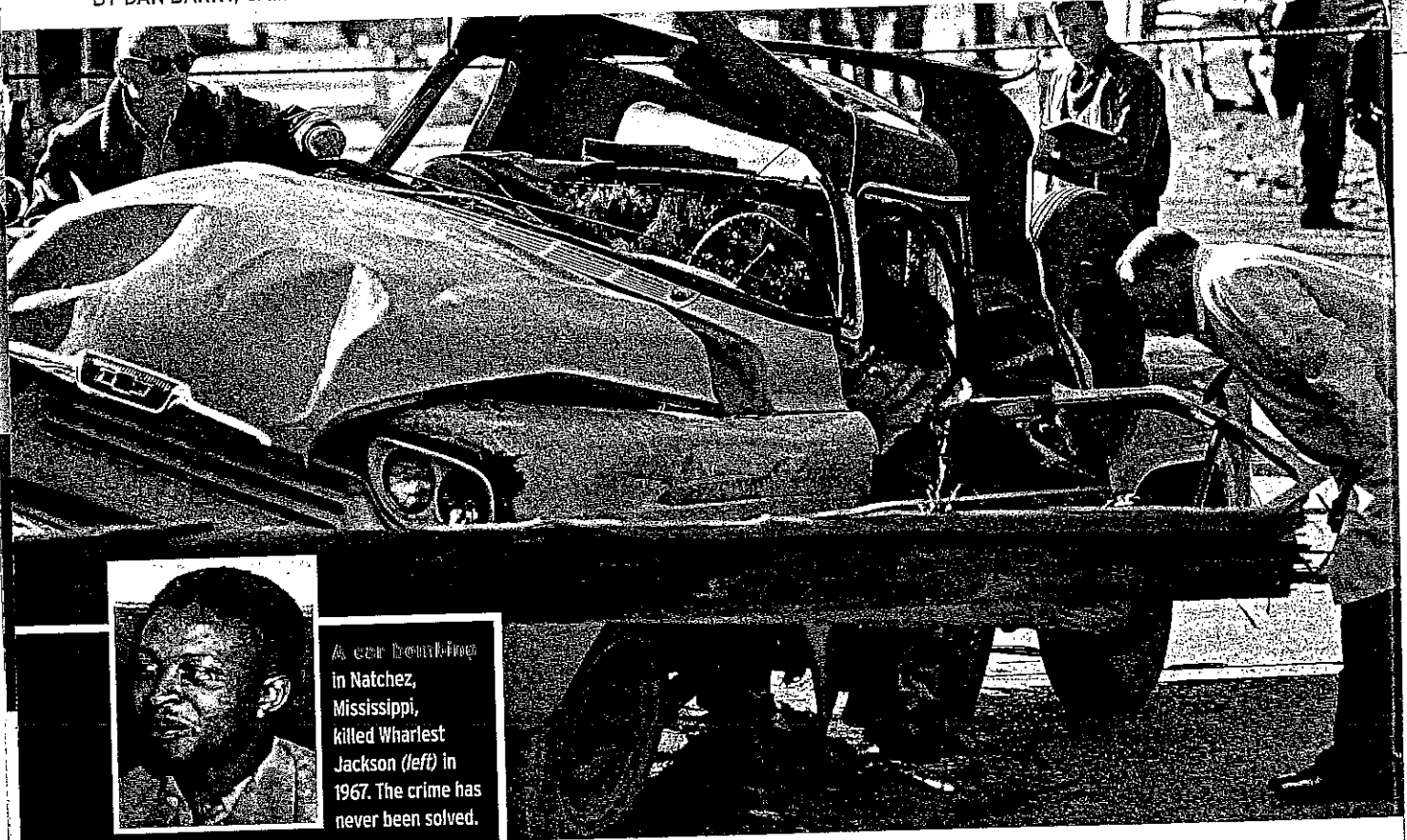


Justice Denied

Fifty years after a string of racially motivated killings in the South, it looks like most cases will remain unsolved

BY DAN BARRY, CAMPBELL ROBERTSON, AND ROBBIE BROWN



A car bombing in Natchez, Mississippi, killed Wharlest Jackson (left) in 1967. The crime has never been solved.

In the spring of 1965, the Federal Bureau of Investigation received a letter from northeastern Louisiana pleading for justice in the killing of a well-respected black merchant.

One morning a few months earlier, Frank Morris had seen two white men in front of his shoe-repair shop in Ferriday, Louisiana. One had pointed a shotgun at him, the other held a canister of gas. A match was lit, a fire began, and Morris died four days later of burns without naming the men, perhaps

fearing retribution against his family.

The letter to the F.B.I. expressed grave concern that the crime would go unpunished because, it said, the local police were probably complicit. "Your office is our only hope, so don't fail us," the letter read. It was signed: "Yours truly, The Colored People of Concordia Parish."*

The case of Frank Morris is one of dozens of racially motivated killings that took place across the South in the 1950s and '60s. At the time, many of these crimes were barely noted, much less investigated. Relatives of victims were often afraid to come forward, lacking faith in the judicial system and fearing retaliation from groups like the Ku Klux Klan, which

waged a campaign of racial terror across the South and was responsible for many of the murders.

Little Hope of Resolution

Five decades later, many of these cases remain unsolved, despite hopes raised several years ago with the reopening of civil rights criminal cases from that era.

"The reality is that justice in a few cases is going to have to serve as a proxy for justice in them all," says Richard Cohen, president of the Southern Poverty Law Center, in Montgomery, Alabama.

In 2006, the F.B.I. began a cold-case initiative described as a comprehensive effort to investigate racially motivated

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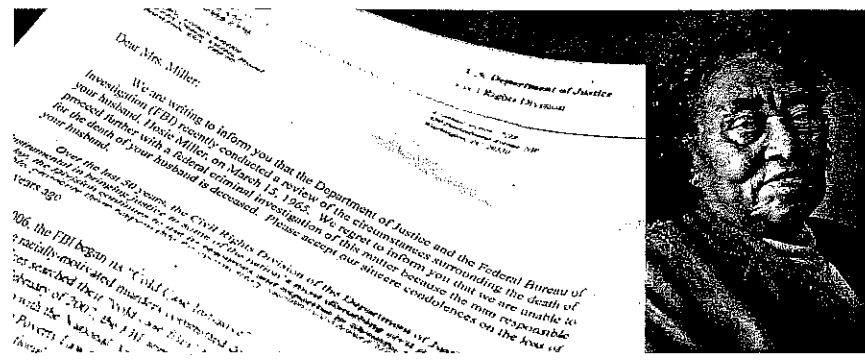
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*Louisiana has parishes rather than counties.



Frank Morris (with arms crossed) was killed when his shoe-repair shop was set on fire in 1964.



Grace Hall Miller and the F.B.I. letter saying the case of her husband's murder has been closed

we have concluded that the now-deceased Cal Hall Jr. acted alone when he shot and killed your husband, and therefore, we have no choice but to close our investigation," the letter said. (Hall, who claimed he acted in self-defense, was tried but never convicted.) "We regret that we cannot be of further assistance to you. Again, please accept our sincere condolences for the loss of your husband."

Miller, now 80, says she cannot understand why the F.B.I. reopened the case to give it only a cursory review. "I guess they were just trying to make a show," she says.

The Frank Morris case remains open. In 2011, a new suspect was identified and a grand jury began investigating, but so far no charges have been filed.

Adam Lee, who oversees civil rights at the F.B.I., says the bureau worked hard to pursue these cold cases, following any evidence that might lead to prosecutions. But, he adds, "that doesn't bring the emotional closure that the public wants, or needs, in cases like this."

Margaret Burnham is the founder of the Civil Rights and Restorative Justice Project at the Northeastern University School of Law in Boston. She says the letters do matter, even if they don't offer resolution.

"Setting aside whether the F.B.I. could have done more, I respect the dignity with which they are accepting responsibility for letting families know how justice failed them," Burnham says. "Whether it's a sufficient thing, I don't know. But it's a necessary thing." •

Dan Barry, Campbell Robertson, and Robbie Brown are reporters for *The New York Times*.

murders from the civil rights era. That effort became a mandate two years later when Congress passed the Emmett Till Unsolved Civil Rights Crime Act. (Till was a 14-year-old black boy who was tortured and killed in Mississippi in 1955 for supposedly flirting with a white woman.)

From the outset, the government faced formidable challenges: limited federal jurisdiction in some cases, the statute of limitations in others, and, of course, the passage of time. Suspects and witnesses die. Evidence is lost. Memories fade. In addition, the law authorized tens of millions of dollars for the project, but just \$2.8 million has come through.

So far, the initiative has resulted in just one successful federal prosecution: In 2007, James Ford Seale was convicted in connection with the 1964 deaths of two young black men in Mississippi. The Ku Klux Klan apparently believed the two men, Charles Moore and Henry Dee, both 19, were black Muslims plotting an armed

uprising. Moore and Dee were tied to trees and whipped, then tied to an engine block and thrown into a river with tape over their mouths.

Seale died in 2011 at age 76 at the prison where he was serving three life sentences.

'Sincere Condolences'

In most of the cases the F.B.I. has reopened, it's been hard to gather enough evidence to bring any suspects to trial. The F.B.I. has sent letters to all but about

20 victims' families saying that their cases have been closed. The letters are, in effect, an acknowledgement that no one is likely to face justice for these crimes.

Grace Hall Miller of Newton, Georgia, received such a letter two years ago. It recounted a day in March 1965 when a man named Cal Hall Jr. fatally shot her husband, Hosie Miller, a farmer and church deacon, in a dispute over cows. Hall, who was white, shot Miller, who was black, in the back.

"After careful review of this incident,

The window of opportunity to bring anyone to justice for these crimes has mostly closed.

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