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**BODY:**

IF MICHAEL Schwerner had never come to Baltimore in 1963, would he have died in Mississippi in 1964?

In the summer of 1963, Schwerner was among the hundreds of demonstrators who sought to desegregate the Gwynn Oak Amusement Park.

"It was the first demonstration he ever participated in," said Taylor Branch, who has written two books in a trilogy he's doing on the life of the Rev. Martin Luther King Jr. and was finishing the third even as I interviewed him.

In August 1964, Schwerner's body was found in an earthen dam along with those of James Chaney and Andrew Goodman. A sheriff's deputy in Neshoba County, Miss., delivered the trio into the not-so-tender mercies of Ku Klux Klansmen on June 21, 1964. All three were shot dead.

The names of Schwerner, Chaney and Goodman surfaced again last week, when Edgar Ray Killen, an alleged KKK member, was charged in the murders. I was reminded of Schwerner's participation in the Gwynn Oak Amusement Park demonstrations by William Bradford Huie's book *Three Lives for Mississippi*, an account of the crime and of Schwerner's being targeted by the KKK long before the night of June 21, 1964.

Somehow my copy of *Three Lives For Mississippi* has vanished (I've reordered it online) so I went to Branch - as fine a nonfiction writer and civil rights historian as there is - to fill me in on the details about Schwerner, who just might be the most unheralded of all civil rights heroes.

Branch said that Schwerner and his wife, Rita, both participated in the Gwynn Oak demonstrations.

"They kind of got swept up in the movement once they came down here to Gwynn Oak," Branch said. The couple also attended the March on Washington in August 1963. After that, Michael Schwerner asked officials of the Congress of Racial Equality - then one of the more radical civil rights organizations - if he could work for the movement in the South.

Schwerner arrived in Meridian, Miss., in January 1964. It was there that he first met Chaney, a native Mississippian. Both men were part of COFO - the Council of Federated Organizations, comprising members of various civil rights organizations operating in Mississippi - and Neshoba County was part of their territory.

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For six months, Schwerner and Chaney tried to persuade local black churches to open their doors for Freedom Schools, which were started by civil rights movement members to teach literacy and citizenship to poor blacks in the South. Schwerner was in Ohio, training a group of Northern students who had volunteered to be part of the effort when, on June 16, a black Neshoba County church whose pastor had agreed to open a Freedom School was burned to the ground and its members beaten. Goodman was among the students Schwerner trained.

Schwerner completed the training on June 20 and headed back to Mississippi with Goodman. Once there, Chaney joined them as the trio went to Neshoba County on June 21 to investigate the bombing and the beatings. A sheriff's deputy arrested the three. Some sources have said an informant tipped off the Neshoba County sheriff's office about the arrival of Schwerner and his two cohorts.

After paying a \$25 fine for speeding, Schwerner, Chaney and Goodman were released. A sheriff's deputy stopped them again and handed them over to their murderers who, for months, had made it clear Schwerner was on their hit list.

"They [Klan members] called him 'The Goatee,'" Branch said. Huie said local Klansmen had another name for Schwerner, one that included an ethnic slur: "the Jew-boy with the beard."

Branch said he's not sure whether Schwerner's murder was the part of a Klan conspiracy, one that Chaney and the star-crossed Goodman - who had only been in Mississippi one day - fell into. There is no indication, Branch said, that there was an attempt on Schwerner's life before June 21, 1964. But Branch said he has heard that Schwerner was a Klan target.

"There's some evidence of that," Branch said. "It is true he was the main target. They definitely were after him. He was more the target than the other two."

A target, and a man of uncommon courage. Surely Schwerner must have known he was on a Klan hit list, which poses an interesting question for all Americans, especially those alive in the early 1960s, most of whom regarded civil rights activists the way we do that crazy uncle who thinks he's Napoleon.

How many of us would have returned to Mississippi in June of 1964 knowing the danger that awaited?

**GRAPHIC:** Photo(s)

Civil rights activist Michael Schwerner was killed June 21, 1964, in Mississippi.

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