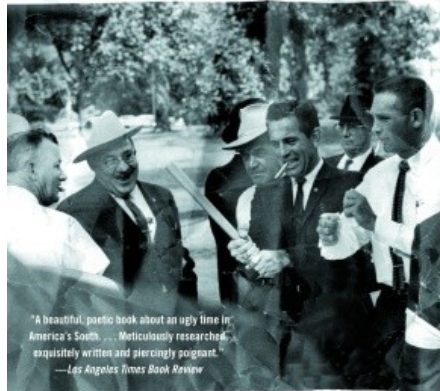


SONS OF MISSISSIPPI

A STORY OF RACE AND ITS LEGACY



PAUL HENDRICKSON

*Author of *The Living and the Dead**

Sons of Mississippi: A Story of Race and Its Legacy

Paul Hendrickson

Download now

Read Online →

Sons of Mississippi: A Story of Race and Its Legacy

Paul Hendrickson

Sons of Mississippi: A Story of Race and Its Legacy Paul Hendrickson

They stand as unselfconscious as if the photograph were being taken at a church picnic and not during one of the pitched battles of the civil rights struggle. None of them knows that the image will appear in *Life* magazine or that it will become an icon of its era. The year is 1962, and these seven white Mississippi lawmen have gathered to stop James Meredith from integrating the University of Mississippi. One of them is swinging a billy club.

More than thirty years later, award-winning journalist and author Paul Hendrickson sets out to discover who these men were, what happened to them after the photograph was taken, and how racist attitudes shaped the way they lived their lives. But his ultimate focus is on their children and grandchildren, and how the prejudice bequeathed by the fathers was transformed, or remained untouched, in the sons. **Sons of Mississippi** is a scalding yet redemptive work of social history, a book of eloquence and subtlety that tracks the movement of racism across three generations and bears witness to its ravages among both black and white Americans.

Sons of Mississippi: A Story of Race and Its Legacy Details

Date : Published January 6th 2004 by Vintage (first published 2003)

ISBN : 9780375704253

Author : Paul Hendrickson

Format : Paperback 368 pages

Genre : History, Nonfiction, Race, North American Hi..., American History

 [Download Sons of Mississippi: A Story of Race and Its Legacy ...pdf](#)

 [Read Online Sons of Mississippi: A Story of Race and Its Legacy ...pdf](#)

Download and Read Free Online Sons of Mississippi: A Story of Race and Its Legacy Paul Hendrickson

From Reader Review *Sons of Mississippi: A Story of Race and Its Legacy* for online ebook

Jay Wigley says

I'm never written a book. But if I could choose one book that I wish I had written instead of the actual author, this would be the one. Everything in history that I've ever cared deeply about is in this book--Mississippi, the South, Civil Rights stuff, everything.

Charles Matthews says

In February 1995, Washington Post reporter Paul Hendrickson was browsing in a bookstore in Berkeley, where he came across a book of photographs by Charles Moore from the civil rights era.

In one photo, a group of white men has focused its attention on a man gripping a wooden stick as if it were a baseball bat. He has a cigarette clenched in his teeth as he demonstrates, with evident amusement, how he intends to use this stick. Meanwhile, the man to his left, whose cigarette is dangling from his upper lip, tears a piece of white cloth into strips -- a man at the extreme right of the photo has tied one of the strips around his left arm.

Another man, with a Stetson pushed back on his head, is laughing -- perhaps at what the stick man is doing. At the left of the photo, a man with the soggy stub of a cigar in his mouth is similarly amused. In the background, a serious-looking man is apparently in conversation with a man obscured by the others.

Context is everything. When we know that these men are Mississippi sheriffs, gathered on the campus of the University of Mississippi in September 1962 just before the attempt of a black man, James Meredith, to enroll at the university, then we think we know the context. Recognition floods in: racist lawmen of a certain age and time, kinsmen of the bully cops of Birmingham and Montgomery and Selma.

I know these men, or the men like them who were my neighbors, my uncles, my friends' fathers and our Sunday school teachers and scoutmasters. When I was growing up in Mississippi, they would say such appalling things about black people that even to remember 40 or 50 years later causes my gorge to rise. Yet I also know that when they weren't spewing racist filth, they could be men one could respect and even love. It was as if, in the lives of these men, a tributary of human feeling had been dammed, grown stagnant and polluted, and its foulness had seeped out and corrupted a mainstream that should have run clear.

Hendrickson has noted this paradox, too: "In the South, as has been observed, people who aren't victims of injustice often are victims of irony." Is it any wonder that so many Mississippians have written so much good fiction?

If we look at any image long enough, it begins to "tease us out of thought," as Keats put it when he tried to wrest the secrets from the figures on his Grecian urn. And something kept Hendrickson looking at this image: "I wanted to know: How did these seven white Southerners get to be this way, and how did it all end, or how is it still going on, and was there no eventual shame here, and what happened to their progeny, especially their progeny, and was it all just ineluctable?"

It seems that no one spends much time in Mississippi without trying to write like Faulkner, resorting to words like "progeny" and "ineluctable." And Hendrickson spent a lot of time in Mississippi trying to answer the questions raised by this picture. Context is everything, but contexts have contexts, ad infinitum. Especially when you're dealing with something so integral to the American experience -- so, yes, ineluctable -- as racial conflict.

For seven years, Hendrickson searched through the contexts of this image. Most of the men in the picture were dead, but their families, as well as the two surviving men, sat down to talk with him in that generous but wary way that Southerners have. The survivors were defensive but not apologetic, Hendrickson tells us: "Anything in the direction of atonement or expiation -- even if never named that or understood as such -- has been left to sons, or to sons of sons, or to sons of sons of sons."

And so the most poignant profiles in his book are of the grandsons of two of the men. John Cothran's grandfather is the man with the armband in the photo, then the sheriff in the Mississippi Delta town of Greenwood. The grandson is a man with anger-management problems that wrecked three marriages before he was 30, a high school dropout who works as a supervisor at a Home Depot, a job that gives him more stress than gratification.

Ty Ferrell's grandfather is the man with the stick, Billy Ferrell, the sheriff in Natchez -- a job that Ty's father, Tommy, now holds. Ty has followed in the family profession, but not in Mississippi -- he's a Border Patrol agent, working out of El Paso, and is so deeply conflicted about what he's doing that it sometimes brings him close to tears in his conversations with Hendrickson. Ty exhibits "what seemed like existential torment, as if he were meant to be a roiling repository for so many unnamed, unclaimed Ferrell family shames."

Hendrickson understands the pain of John Cothran and Ty Ferrell, which makes the profiles of the grandsons more affecting than those of the men who appear in the photo. For Hendrickson never succeeds in answering the first of his questions: How did they get to be this way? "It's so puzzling that a land of such charm and physical beauty, a people of such natural grace and disposition to kindness, could have so appalling a history," Hendrickson muses. How did a bigotry so pathological take hold of an entire region?

The best Hendrickson can do is to cite "The Mind of the South," W.J. Cash's 1941 classic, in which Cash, a Southern journalist, wrote of a "crisis of white masculinity": "The ultimate and as-yet-unrealized expression of the overthrow of slavery in the white male mind would be the destruction of the white sexual order." So Hendrickson asks about the men in the picture, "Is it too much to suggest that there may be a faint undertone of sexualized tension in their faces?"

What I see in this picture I have seen in locker rooms and committee meetings and other all-male gatherings, where testosterone speaks to testosterone and the old primate emerges. But what I also see are the products of a closed system, of a place where opinions went unchallenged by other ways of thinking, to the point that prevailing attitudes could be swaddled in a communal bigotry. (There are many other places like this in the world, which makes understanding the Mississippi experience all the more crucial.)

By far the most potent figure in Hendrickson's book is a man who doesn't appear in the photograph: James Meredith, who shattered the monolithic system of racial repression -- if it could happen in Mississippi, it could happen anywhere.

But Meredith stepped out to his own drummer -- after his graduation from Ole Miss, he stubbornly refused to align with any civil rights organization, starting his own solitary crusade for voting rights, including a one-man march through Mississippi during which he was almost assassinated. Later, he would shock and appall

even those who had regarded him as a hero: He took a job as an aide to Sen. Jesse Helms and endorsed ex-Klansman David Duke's candidacy for the Republican presidential nomination -- Meredith even volunteered to be Duke's running mate. Hendrickson's interviews with Meredith only reinforce his reputation for eccentricity.

As the 40th anniversary of Meredith's entrance to Ole Miss approached, his son, Joe, quietly enrolled in a Ph.D. program in business at the university. Joe, who had graduated magna cum laude from Harvard, seems puzzled by his father, too. He tells Hendrickson, "My father has an overwhelming need to be famous and so will do whatever he thinks will provide that and get him attention -- Jesse Helms, David Duke, you name it, even if it's only for a day."

"Sons of Mississippi" feels like a substantial, maybe even essential, contribution to our understanding not only of Southern racism, but also of the ways that the past can mark and mar. The book is sometimes over-reported -- not every detail of Joe Cothran's messy, mundane life is worth telling, for example. And complexities sometimes overwhelm Hendrickson -- his book occasionally seems like several very good magazine articles struggling to get out of the stack of paper in which they're buried.

But Hendrickson is a humane observer who can disarm the reader's impatience. And he's clearly on a mission -- you don't spend seven years researching a book if you're not. As he puts it, "In Mississippi, nothing ever changes, and everything always changes, and sometimes it seems as if God put Mississippi on earth purely for our moral and confounding contemplation."

Jim Bowen says

As a newcomer to the US, I am perhaps more aware of the role of race here than I am in the UK. However, despite living here 2 years, was still at a loss as to its' origins and why it occurred here.

This book helped me see the American "South" in a new light. Gone are my perceptions that large sections of the old confederate south are your typical "KKK style bigots", but it has been replaced with a recognition that the racism that the African-American community experienced may well still be there.

Sure the burning crosses are gone but the "racism of the mind", the unspoken racism that most people are too ashamed to raise but which must still be present among some, both in the North and in the South, is still very much alive and well in the US.

Mary Drew says

The author uses a picture by famed Civil-Rights photographer Charles Moore and riffs on it. He follows each one of the seven men in the photo, interviews peers and descendants, traces history of the towns where they each served as Sheriff or Deputy-Sheriff, and tries to tease out what the legacy of these seven actually is in today's world.

This is a tough narrative to glue together because he takes so many tangents - I am curious to see how he'll

stick them all together at the end.

I like this book because 1. I learned a lot - about the chronology of Civil Rights history in Mississippi, and about Mississippi. 2. I like books that use a qualitative method in assessing actions, behavior, and consequences. This was a very thoughtful book. 3. He doesn't necessarily come up with conclusions - he leaves that up to the reader. He seemed at least somewhat open as to judgement about people; not so regarding events.

Curious: how does one feel knowing that what one will write about another person might not be what that person would like - especially after having been a guest in that person's home?

A surprise: how tormented James Meredith is/was. So very sad.

Tara Fredenburg says

"On judgement day, all the slain bodies from all the fevered and silted Mississippi waters will rise as one."

I read this for a college course on Mississippi literature.

Many sections of this book are intriguing, particularly the account with James Meredith, his sons, and the descendants of the men in the cover's photograph. There are few things as convoluted and distressing as the cognitive dissonance found within white Southern communities--the way so many of these younger white men would say something that gives the reader the slightest hope that the arc of the moral universe truly does bend toward justice, and then suddenly revoke the hope with a slur or some other racially aggressive slip-up that reveals the truth.

This certainly reads like a pre-Trump era book (because it is), and it's important for current readers to keep this fact in mind. My class and I were tempted to say Well We Been Knew about so much of this racism-related material, but the truth is that much of white America was (and still is) ignorant to the truths in this book. On another level, this book is difficult to read when so much of our current conversations concern voice and WHO gets their voices shared. Much of Hendrickson's book is about racist people saying racist things with varied amounts of regret or self-consciousness. I spent much of my reading time wondering what the value was in reading something about racists when I could read something more enlightening by a black author.

Structural elements I would have changed about *Sons of Mississippi* are the length and its pull-quality. I was only expected to read certain chapters of the book for my class, and I ended up finishing it simply because I had spent money on it. If it had been shorter, more concise, and written in a more absorptive fashion, I would have gotten through it faster and remembered more about the specific people interviewed, rather than just about those who seemed most fascinating, like the Ty Ferrel or Joe Meredith.

Hendrickson did an astounding amount of research for *Sons of Mississippi*. It's quite an admirable feat.

Catherine says

In concept, this book was interesting. It tells the story of seven Mississippi sheriffs, captured in a Life Magazine photo, shortly before the race riot over the integration of the University of Mississippi ("Ole Miss"). The author examines the lives of each racist sheriff (some in more detail than others), and then traces the evolution of their racist attitudes forward through the next generations of their families.

Unfortunately, in execution, this book falls short. As an initial matter, the lives of the individuals in the photo simply were not that interesting. While they were sheriffs during an interesting time, the men themselves did little of significance and for the most part, did little to leave a mark on history. Their brethren were even more insignificant, amounting to nothing more than average Joes and Janes. This makes for dull storytelling, and I found myself struggling to stay engaged throughout the book.

In addition, the book was poorly organized, jumping around from person to person and family to family. This made it difficult to discern whatever point Hendrickson was trying to make.

In short, if you are looking for a book on race relations in Mississippi from the 1960s forward, there are likely better vehicles for that subject. Nevertheless, Mr. Hendrickson does deserve some credit for identifying a novel framework within which to tell that story.

Denise Gee says

This is a powerfully woven story about a group of virulently racist Mississippi sheriffs (one being my neighbor in Natchez) who went to Ole Miss to oppose James Meredith's admittance -- and how their sons, and in some cases their sons, have dealt with the legacy of having the sheriffs' arrogant and angry stance captured for posterity in a Life magazine photo by Charles Moore. That said, the writing of this book is simply superb. I started underlining passages and expressions in pencil so that I can go back time and again to be inspired by Paul Hendrickson's supreme way with words. This is an exceptional, memorable read.

Andrea says

A bit slow moving but fascinating.

Willis says

This is a book related to the Civil Rights movement of the Sixties in the deep South of Mississippi where James Meredith was the first black to enroll at the University of Mississippi. I was expecting to learn more about the story and its context within the broader Civil Rights movement so I was a little dissatisfied. In a different twist, the author focuses on the lives of 7 individuals who appear in the photograph on the front cover of the book. They were all Mississippi lawmen and in a way represent the racist attitudes of the times. The author talks about who these relatively ordinary men were and what became of them. He talks about their families and how and what has changed in the attitudes of the South since that tumultuous time. The book

mainly consists of his interviews with the surviving men and their relatives and families. His point is that change in attitudes takes time and that slowly those racist attitudes are fading away. It is more the stories of some individuals, rather than a history of some Civil Rights event.

James Blatter says

a riveting account of the intergration of Ole Miss and the banality of common everyday evil and our willingness to just let it pass or even participate. And of of who we might be today in that continuing struggle

Robert Bean says

I found this to be an intriguing way to approach a historical event. It was well worth the read (and the \$1 price tag at Big Lots). We all hear the stories that surround an event in history, but we rarely hear how those events affect events for years to come, and that's why this book is worth reading. It's an interesting look at a group of law men and their descendants, and how the choices they made at the time the photo was taken helped to shape all of the events that followed in their lives. I highly recommend this book.

Cigno says

Hendrickson's well researched recounting of the lives of seven Mississippi lawmen in the 1960's. Hendrickson's recounting of their stories as well as the history of Natchez and Oxford, MS shed much light on the legacy of racism, not just in MS but un the US.

The book peaks with the race riots that followed James Meredith's registration to Ole Miss. The details surrounding this episode, which includes unethical activity by the federal government is stunning.

The author closes the final 3rd of the book covering the offspring of the lawmen as well as James Meredith through extensive interviews he did with all of them.

Great read.

Julian Haigh says

Fantastic look down the dynasty of a famous photograph of mainly Mississippi Sheriff's prior to the 62 riot over admission of a black man to Ole-Miss: University of Mississippi. An superb story of how a culture and political position transition down 3 or 4 generations. A collection of stories of 'real-lives' this isn't a riveting thriller, but at the end you really get a sense of what the author was saying, that almost defies words.

Most interestingly to me was that James Meredith didn't identify with the civil rights movement. History is murky and we tend to overlook some characters, like James, that don't fit our narrative. What comes out most in this book is the ordinary lives and approaches, viewpoints and considerations that elude more grandiose attempts.

This book is real. If you want to get a 'feel' for some of the characters around 60s and into the present and how the past is present, this is the book for you.

Aaron Horton says

The book was interesting learning about what happen to the sheriffs in the cover of this book. How racial attitudes effected their children later in life. You can look at the news today about racial problems in America. This country tries to hide too much. This is history now and we as a country will never heal until we confront the issues.

Carmen says

This book took a famous picture from Time magazine where you see a group of sherrifs standing in a circle with a billy club. The story behind the photo is that they are there to stop the integration of the University of Mississippi.

Well, the book isn't about the actual event. What it does is take each sherrif in the photo and tell their story, along with the story of the photographer and the man who first integrated UM.

Even better, the author follows the story of the children of each of these men. What ensues are stories of grace, fear, love, dominance and certified craziness.

Recommended!
