



THE EYES OF WILLIE MCGEE

A TRAGEDY OF RACE, SEX, AND SECRETS
IN THE JIM CROW SOUTH



ALEX HEARD

The Eyes of Willie McGee

A Tragedy of Race, Sex, and Secrets in the Jim Crow South

Alex Heard

 HarperCollins e-books

I can hear Rosalee

See the eyes of Willie McGee

My mother told me about

Lynchings

My mother told me about

The dark nights

And dirt roads

And torch lights

And lynch robes...

The

Faces of men

Laughing white

Faces of men

Dead in the night.

sorrow night

and a

sorrow night

—Lorraine Hansberry, “Lynchsong,” 1951

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THE HOT SEAT

On May 8, 1951, a thirty-five-year-old African American named Willie McGee was electrocuted in Laurel, Mississippi, on a much-disputed charge that he raped a white housewife named Willette Hawkins. A few days later Eleanor Roosevelt, who was traveling in Europe, received a protest letter about the execution, sent by a Swiss citizen who identified himself as Mr. F. Aegerter.

Aegerter didn't know Roosevelt and she didn't know him. But he knew she was in Geneva for a meeting of the United Nations Commission on Human Rights, so he took a moment to sound off about the human rights of Willie McGee, a man whose death he deeply mourned. During a legal battle that lasted more than five years, McGee's story had risen from obscurity to fame, and Aegerter, who probably read about McGee in French-language newspapers, felt certain he was innocent. As he knew the former First Lady had avoided taking part in a widely publicized campaign to stop the execution. He wanted to know why.

Roosevelt didn't apologize. Just the opposite, she pushed back. In a reply written on the 18th, she told Aegerter she was very familiar with the facts of the McGee saga—unlike him. “[Y]ou do not seem to have much understanding of the case about which you write,” she informed him coolly. “It is quite true that all of us oppose a law which is applied differently to white and colored and that happens to still be in effect in some southern states....

“In the case of Willie McGee, while I regret there should be this discrimination in the law, I have to add that he was a bad character and so was the white woman, so there was very little that one could feel personally about.”

That sounded definite, as if she had inside information. But the truth was that Roosevelt knew very little about McGee or “the white woman.” A lot of what she thought she knew—and this was true for Aegerter as well—was rumor mixed with fact, unproven allegations, or simply wrong, since the story produced more than its share of inaccurate reporting, lies, and colorful but useless folklore.

The “bad character” phrase makes it clear she'd heard about and believed the most explosive allegation of all: McGee's claim that his sexual encounter with Willette wasn't a rape but an act of consensual sex, part of a long-standing love affair that she had instigated. As for Roosevelt's observation that the story lacked elements that could stir the soul, she couldn't have been more off base, because Aegerter wasn't the only person who cared. By 1951, hundreds of thousands of people knew McGee's name and what it represented, and many had passionate opinions about what had happened to him inside Mississippi courtrooms.

The story began in November 1945, when McGee, a longtime Laurel resident who worked as the driver of a wholesale grocery-delivery truck, was charged with breaking into a home in a middle-class white neighborhood and raping Mrs. Troy Hawkins, a thirty-two-year-old housewife and mother of three.

The rape allegedly happened in the predawn hours of November 2, a warm autumn Friday. As the still-traumatized Mrs. Hawkins told police after daybreak that morning, she was asleep in a front bedroom with a sick twenty-month-old girl at her side. Her thirty-seven-year-old husband was in a

room near the back of the house, having gone there after spending several hours helping Willette take care of the child. She said she woke up and heard a man crawling toward her on the floor. In an instant, he was on top of her, smelling like whiskey and threatening to kill her and the child if she didn't shut up and submit. Once he was done, he told her never to say a word about what happened or he would come back and kill her. Then he ran out the front door. Mrs. Hawkins said it was too dark to see the rapist's face, but she knew he was black by the texture of his hair.

McGee became a suspect in part because he didn't show up for work on Friday, but also because Laurel police found witnesses—including two male friends of his—whose statements seemed to place him in the vicinity at the time of the assault. He was arrested the next day in a nearby city, Hattiesburg, briefly taken back to Laurel, and then driven to jail ninety miles away in Jackson, the state capital. Jackson was home to a massive county courthouse with a two-floor, upper-story lockup that was considered safe from attacks by lynch mobs. Often in cases like this, black defendants were whisked away from wherever they'd been arrested and taken straight to the Hinds County jail.

The trial was held in early December, amid so much local hostility that the governor of Mississippi sent McGee back to Laurel under heavily armed guard. It lasted only a day, with an all-white jury sentencing him to death after deliberating for less than three minutes. There would be two more circuit-court trials—the first two verdicts were reversed on procedural grounds by the Mississippi Supreme Court—followed by a three-year period of state and federal appeals, including multiple appeals to the U.S. Supreme Court.

For a long time—through all three trials, in fact—the McGee case was barely noticed outside Mississippi, but by the end that had changed dramatically. People all over the United States, Canada, South America, Europe, and Asia had read or heard about his death sentence and were convinced he was either the victim of a racist frame-up or, if guilty, had been condemned unfairly, since Mississippi's death penalty for rape was only applied to blacks, never to whites. In 1950 and 1951, thousands of individuals sent letters, postcards, and telegrams to public officials who had the authority to halt the execution—including Mississippi's governor and chief justice, the justices on the U.S. Supreme Court, and President Harry S. Truman—demanding either a new trial, a prison term instead of death, or outright clemency. A week before the execution, Truman even heard from McGee's children, who pleaded with him in a letter to save their father.

Dear Mr. President,

We are writing to you about our daddy Willie McGee who have been in jail five years and on May eight they are going to put our daddy on the hot seat. Will you please not let him die, Mr. Truman. You is our president.

My name is Gracie Lee McGee. I have two sisters and one brother. My poor mother is somewhere trying to get my daddy home. She may come by your house. Please help her.

Like F. Aegerter, most people who spoke out weren't public figures, but several were—or soon would be. McGee's lead defense attorney during the appeals was Bella Abzug, a young labor lawyer from New York who was destined for fame in the 1960s and 1970s as a feminist and politician. Long before that, the McGee case put her in the national spotlight for the first time. In March 1951, William Faulkner, the recent recipient of the Nobel Prize for Literature, signed off on a press release that said that McGee was probably innocent and should be spared. In April, Albert Einstein issued a statement in which he asserted, with utmost confidence, that "any unprejudiced human being must find it difficult to believe that this man really committed the rape of which he has been accused. Moreover,

the punishment must appear unnaturally harsh to anyone with any sense of justice.”

~~There was a lot more besides—support from people like Paul Robeson, Josephine Baker, Jessica Mitford, Norman Mailer, Richard Wright, and Frida Kahlo, along with protests from labor unions, political groups, and foreign governments. As McGee’s last day approached, the U.S. State Department sent a staffer to monitor the case in Jackson because many foreign embassies, prompted by inquiries from citizens back home, were demanding to know why Mississippi seemed determined to kill an innocent man. By the end, news organizations all over the world—including the *New York Times*, the *Washington Post*, *Time*, *Life*, *Newsweek*, the *Nation*, and newspapers overseas—were covering McGee intensively. The day after his electrocution, the French paper *Combat* spoke for many when it declared that “the Mississippi executioner has won out over the world conscience... Yesterday morning a little of the liberty of all men and a little of the solidarity between the peoples died with Willie McGee.”~~

What prompted much of this was McGee’s claim about interracial sex, a real-life version of a fictional theme that, nearly a decade later, would be at the heart of Harper Lee’s Pulitzer Prize-winning novel; *To Kill a Mockingbird*. In the novel, Mayella Ewell, a lower-class white woman, sets up a deadly chain of events when she and her father tell the sheriff of a Depression-era Alabama town that she was raped by a black man, Tom Robinson, who narrowly escapes lynching just before his trial starts. In court, Atticus Finch, a local white attorney of flawless integrity, presents a convincing case that Mayella lied—that she’d made a pass at Tom, was rejected, and went along with the false accusation to save herself from her father’s violent rage. An all-white jury finds Robinson guilty anyway and sentences him to death. He’s shot and killed while attempting to escape from jail.

McGee’s story was just as grim but much more carnal. In *Mockingbird* there was no sex, just fabricated accusations about it. In the McGee case, the sex—if it happened—was rampant and insanely risky, given the time and place. According to McGee, it all started when he was waxing floors in Mrs. Hawkins’s home one afternoon and, he said, “she showed a willingness to be familiar.” With small children in the house and her husband at work, she took him to a bedroom, stripped, and flopped down on a mattress. This wouldn’t be their only encounter: in a story that evolved considerably over time, McGee said they had sex frequently during an affair that lasted for several years.

Though McGee said he tried to break off the relationship, knowing he’d be lynched if they were found out, Mrs. Hawkins supposedly wouldn’t let go. She publicly harassed him and his wife, Rosalee, accosting them both on the streets of Laurel and calling Rosalee a “Negro whore.” She turned up at his house to knock on his door, drove him to a graveyard for midnight encounters, and left a note in a gas pump nozzle at a service station where he worked.

Her final misdeed was to condemn McGee to death by crying rape once the affair came to light, and for this she would be pilloried in the years ahead. A few months after McGee died, an African-American poet and actress named Beulah Richardson—who, under the stage name Beah Richards, was nominated for an Oscar in 1968 for her supporting role in *Guess Who’s Coming to Dinner*—set the tone in a poem called “A Black Woman Speaks.” One of its chief villains was Mrs. Hawkins, “the depraved, enslaved, adulterous woman, whose lustful demands denied, lied and killed what she could not possess.”

Tennessee Williams weighed in too, years later, in his 1957 play *Orpheus Descending*. In act one, Carol Cutrere, an eccentric white Mississippian, talks about her early involvement in civil rights causes, saying, “I delivered stump speeches, wrote letters of protest about the gradual massacre of the colored majority in the county.... And when that Willie McGee thing came along—he was sent to the chair for having improper relations with a white whore—I made a fuss about it. I put on a potato sack and set out for the capitol on foot. This was in winter. I walked barefoot in this burlap sack to deliver personal protest to the Governor of the State.... You know how far I got? Six miles out of town—

hooted, jeered at, even spit on!—every step of the way—and then arrested!”

Eleanor Roosevelt may not have known all the lurid details, but she knew the basics. In the end, though, the reason she ignored McGee was more about politics than personal distaste, and from her perspective this was the only wise choice she had.

Roosevelt was no coward about civil rights. Among much else, she'd faced down her husband and his advisers in 1934, when she supported federal anti-lynching legislation that FDR refused to get behind, fearing the loss of white Democratic support in the South. But she could only push it so far, and the McGee case was beyond the pale because it involved a third color along with black and white and red. Many of McGee's supporters were Communists, and during his long legal ordeal, his defense was paid for by the New York-based Civil Rights Congress (CRC), a group whose staff and supporters included radioactive far-left figures like Robeson, CRC head William L. Patterson, Communist Party chief William Z. Foster, and the writers and editors of the *Daily Worker*, the contentious organ of the Communist Party USA.

Throughout 1950 and 1951, a lot of the pro-McGee protest noise came from Communist governments overseas. The ruling officials of Red China denounced Truman for allowing McGee's death, while the Soviet Union sent out crackling radio broadcasts that railed against the United States for its racial hypocrisy. On the home front, domestic Communists and radical union members marched through the streets of major cities like New York, Chicago, Los Angeles, San Francisco, and Washington, D.C., where a group of men wearing FREE WILLIE MCGEE T-shirts chained themselves to the columns of the Lincoln Memorial. News of the execution was a blow to one of the most famous American Communists of the era, Julius Rosenberg. Just after it happened, in a letter to his wife, Ethel, written from his prison cell, the accused atomic spy lamented the evils of a system that would allow such an injustice to occur.

“Ethel I was terribly shocked to read that Willie McGee was executed,” he wrote. “You know how I am affected by these things.... My heart is sad [and] my eyes are filled with tears. Shame, America!! Shame on those who perpetrated [*sic*] this heinous act!! Greater Shame on those who did not lift their voices and hands to stop the...Mississippi executioner.”

Roosevelt knew all about the Communist connection. As letters between her and her contacts at the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People show, her opinions about McGee were essentially dictated to her by the NAACP, which stiff-armed him because the CRC had gained control of the case.

The NAACP's hostility had its roots in the spring of 1946, when the group, along with many other liberal, progressive, and left-wing outfits, was invited to Detroit to participate in a two-day “Initiating Committee for a Congress on Civil Rights.” The NAACP sent observers who reported that the gathering ended with the merger of previously existing organizations into an ambitious new entity called the Civil Rights Congress. CRC leaders vowed to become a major new force in turning post-World War II agitation for civil rights and Cold War-era civil liberties into a movement that would sweep the nation.

That meeting took place in April; within days, NAACP personnel were already brooding about the new competition. “Gloster Current telephoned my house from Detroit last night, saying he felt we should watch very carefully the newly set up National Congress of Civil Rights Organizations,” NAACP executive secretary Walter White wrote in a May 1, 1946, memo to a colleague. “...He opened up the conversation by saying that the so-called civil rights conference had been called by the Comrades. I regard Gloster as an expert on the activity of the Comrades and on their various ‘fronts.’”

The upshot was a blanket policy of noncooperation. Throughout the ten-year history of the CRC the NAACP almost always balked at joint effort on cases, like McGee's, that involved allegations of racially motivated judicial railroading.

The NAACP conveyed its feelings directly to Roosevelt in July 1950, when the McGee case began making national news in advance of a July 27 execution date that was later postponed by the U.S. Supreme Court. "This is, unfortunately, another one of those cases where the Communists persuaded an apparently innocent family to turn over the case to them," White wrote her on the 24th. With the case approaching its climax in the spring of 1951, Roosevelt received an appeal from a CRC lawyer named Aubrey Grossman. She promptly wrote to tell him that he didn't have his facts straight. It could be reasonably argued, she said, that McGee's punishment fit the crime, but in any event such matters were best left to the wiser heads at the NAACP. Do that, she advised, and unfortunates like McGee "would not have added suspicions aroused against them."

I didn't know any of this when I first started researching McGee's story a few years ago, but it didn't take long to see that the case, after all these decades, was still full of mysteries that warranted a fresh look. I got interested one summer day in 2004, when I was browsing in a used bookstore and came across Philip Dray's *At the Hands of Persons Unknown*, a history of lynching published in 2002. The book contains a brief account of the McGee case, and as I skimmed it, I realized I'd heard of McGee long before, in 1979.

Back then, I was a junior at Vanderbilt University in Nashville, Tennessee, studying English and history and working on student publications. The school provided us with the guidance of a part-time adviser named Jim Leeson, a former civil rights reporter who was originally from Hattiesburg, the town near Laurel where McGee was arrested in 1945. One night, as he often did, Leeson invited a few students over for dinner. Late in the evening, he played a tape he'd recorded himself in 1951, from a broadcast by Hattiesburg radio station WFOR. It was a live, half-hour news report that went out from the execution scene on the night McGee died.

The electrocution happened a few minutes after midnight on Tuesday, May 8, on the second floor of the Jones County Courthouse. As required by Mississippi law—for a condemned man of any race—McGee was put to death in a portable electric chair that was set up in the same courtroom where he'd been convicted. Inside, official onlookers—including local and state law enforcement people, prosecutors, newsmen, and a few male relatives of Mrs. Hawkins, who wasn't there—waited for McGee to be brought over from the city jail next door and strapped in to the clumsy-looking wood-and-metal contraption. Outside, a crowd of roughly a thousand white adults and children milled around, talking, laughing, and looking up at the courthouse's second-floor windows for a sign that the execution was about to happen.

A truck housing a generator was parked near the jail on a courthouse driveway. The electrical current would travel from the truck through long lines that snaked up to a second-story window and over the courtroom floor. The radiomen were outside too, using a portable transmitter they'd set up near the truck. There wasn't much to see, so they made do by talking about the scene in the courtyard.

"Time is rapidly running out for Willie McGee," said one of the broadcasters, a Mississippi radio veteran named Granville Walters.

"...[T]hey are opening the truck, getting it all set, ready to turn it on, so that the juice will be funneled up through these cables...to the chair."

Leeson didn't play this tape to be morbid. He was twenty when he recorded it—about my age when I heard it—and he shared it as an example of how much things had changed since his years in

college. He grew up in Mississippi before the civil rights era began, when segregation and Jim Crow were the ironclad law of the land. I was born in Mississippi too—in Jackson in 1957—but my experiences were completely different. He lived in a small town in the 1940s, a decade when lynchings were still common in the South, public interracial romances were forbidden by law and custom, and famous political demagogues like Mississippi senator Theodore G. Bilbo still rolled into towns and delivered live, courthouse-square speeches promising that white supremacy would endure forever.

I grew up in the 1960s, on a suburban street that could have been almost anywhere. And although I was able to understand, dimly, that major changes were happening, it would be a pose to say that I really grasped what was going on. I was only four when James Meredith enrolled at the University of Mississippi, sparking fatal riots; five when Medgar Evers was assassinated in Jackson; and seven when Chaney, Goodman, and Schwerner were murdered in the central Mississippi town of Philadelphia.

I remained oblivious, even when the changes started affecting me directly. I was in seventh grade in 1970, when Jackson's public schools were finally desegregated after sixteen years of resistance. By the time I started paying attention to current events—in ninth grade, which was also the year I first read *To Kill a Mockingbird*—my Mississippi years had come to an end. My father took a new job in Kansas and we moved in 1972. I've been back to the state many times since—I have family there—but only as a visitor, never a resident.

Seeing Dray's book made me want to know more, not only about McGee, but about the history of Mississippi and the South as a whole between the end of World War II and the mid-1950s. It was an important and violent period—notable for the front-line activities of Communists and other radicals—and it's usually skipped in standard histories of the civil rights movement.

I looked around for a full-length account of the McGee case, but I couldn't find one, just a few pages here and there in books, old magazine and journal articles, and on Web sites. McGee was the subject of a chapter in Carl Rowan's *South of Freedom*, a 1952 collection of reporting about race issues below the Mason-Dixon Line, and in Jessica Mitford's 1977 memoir, *A Fine Old Conflict*. The case also came up in *Against Our Will*, Susan Brownmiller's 1975 study of the history and politics of rape.

From these and other accounts, I could see that the question of “what really happened” between McGee and Mrs. Hawkins was still a moving target. Dray seemed convinced that the affair story was true, as did Mitford, a former Communist Party member who was involved in McGee protests in Jackson in 1951. Brownmiller took the opposite view, pointing out that the affair was an allegation, not proven fact. She thought Mrs. Hawkins might have been telling the truth, and that she could have been defamed by people who found it easier to blame her than the Mississippi justice system, or who could not accept that, sometimes, black men accused of rape in the bad old days had actually done something wrong. Brownmiller didn't mean this excused mob action or one-sided trials. She did mean that it was possible for a woman like Mrs. Hawkins to be turned into a caricature—that of a soulless, evil sex fiend who didn't care who had to die to cover up her lust and lies.

Rowan, a prominent black journalist originally from Tennessee, didn't seem sure either way. At times posing as a drifter, he traveled to Laurel in early 1951, where he heard juke-joint talk to the effect that everybody in town knew McGee and Mrs. Hawkins were carrying on. However, he had no way of knowing whether this was truth or fiction. Politically, Rowan was a middle-of-the-roader who didn't care for McGee's Communist defenders, and he believed their interference did more harm than good. In a chapter called “Run! The Red Vampire!” he wrote, “The Reds, shedding crocodile tears, put a fatal ‘curse’ on McGee, for non-Communist liberals began to shy away. A Negro leader explained that the ‘case would warrant the support of the general public, but because the Communists are

connected with it, the people are afraid to say anything.’”

~~From where I was based—Santa Fe, New Mexico—it was hard to do much research, but I did~~ notice that the case’s basic facts didn’t match up from one telling to the next. For whatever reason, nobody spelled Willette Hawkins’s first name right, using variations like Wiletta, Willett, and Willametta. There was also confusion about McGee’s children. One book said he had four, named Willie Earl, Della, Gracie Lee, and Mary. Another said there were two, named Adolphus and Marjori. Those were small mistakes, but they hinted at something significant. It seemed possible that, like Eleanor Roosevelt, the people who had written about the McGee case really didn’t know much about him or Mrs. Hawkins.

The other glaring problem was missing information. The three circuit-court trials were never summarized in much detail, which was probably a sign that the transcripts hadn’t survived. It was unclear whether Bella Abzug had argued the case in trial court or had come in later, during appeals. It was evident that some of the defense work was handled by in-state lawyers—I saw the names Dixon Pyles and John Poole, Mississippians both—but there were few facts about who they were or what they did.

At some point that summer, I realized that if I wanted to know more, I had to start over, diving in to see if I could find comprehensive newspaper coverage and primary documents—transcripts, appeals, letters, organizational papers, FBI files, and so forth. If the information wasn’t available, I’d probably hang it up, because there was no reason to keep reading secondhand accounts.

At the same time, I would try to find any surviving children of McGee and Mrs. Hawkins, and if I couldn’t locate them—or if they refused to talk—I’d probably quit for that reason as well. They were sure to know indispensable things. If they wouldn’t open up, I’d never feel confident that I knew the whole story.

Of the two main tasks, I suspected that finding family members would be harder. McGee’s wife Rosalee, became a public figure during the case, because the CRC sent her on speaking tours that took her all over the North, Midwest, and West. But then she dropped out of sight, appearing in only a couple of newspaper stories after 1952. I had no idea where she ended up, what happened to her children, or whether they numbered two, four, or six.

I had less to go on with the Hawkins children: All I knew was that, circa 1945, there were three young girls. What were their names? And were they or their parents still alive?

It took months to find out, and as I did so—through trial, error, and luck—I became convinced that the old, long-dormant story of Willie McGee deserved a complete reexamination. Partly because it was an important civil rights episode that had never been explored in full. Partly because, as I soon found out, some of the mistakes about the case were game changers.

I found the Hawkins daughters first—sort of. For months, I didn’t know what their names were, and it would be a while before I communicated with any of them directly. A Web search led me to a woman named Mary Mostert, a Utah-based freelance journalist in her seventies who had written about McGee for the *Nation* back in 1951, when she was a young progressive based in Memphis, Tennessee. Mostert, who had moved to the right politically since then, was still working, and she’d recently written a Web article that used her old *Nation* story as an example of how the political bias of editors can distort what a journalist intends to say.

Her sense in 1951 was that the case was too confusing for her to know whether McGee was guilty or not. But the *Nation*, she said, had changed her words to emphasize his innocence. Just the opposite happened to a colleague who filed a report for *Time*. He was unsure too, but since *Time* was known for

its strong anti-Communist line, his editors manipulated his copy to underscore McGee's guilt.

I called Mostert, who told me her piece had prompted two of the Hawkins's grown grandchildren to e-mail her, asking for tips on researching the case. Later, she heard from one of the daughters, who explained that it was she who had inadvertently aroused the curiosity of the grandkids. This woman—Mostert wouldn't give me her name at first—had gotten upset when she happened to see an HBO documentary profiling Beah Richards, in which Richards read from "A Black Woman Speaks." She had heard about the affair story, but she didn't know until seeing this program that it was so widely accepted as fact. She mentioned this to her sisters, who told their children about it. Some of the grandkids decided to do Web research on their own, which led them to Mostert.

I asked Mostert what the family's goal was. She wasn't sure, and she wouldn't give me contact information. Instead, she passed my name along to the daughter. For months, I communicated with her indirectly, using Mostert as a go-between and occasionally seeing snippets of what she'd written in her e-mails. It was no surprise that she believed McGee was guilty.

"When I was eight years old, Willie McGee broke into our home and raped my mother," she wrote in one. "My twenty-month-old sister was in bed with her. My [other] sister and I were in the next room. My father was in the back bedroom, trying to rest after a late shift at work and helping my mother comfort a sick child. Our lives changed forever."

Sometimes, through Mostert, I would pass along a piece of information I had come across, and during one of these exchanges I made a mistake that almost shut down the conversation for good. Since I didn't have any sources in Mississippi—just friends and relatives—I was cold-calling all over the place at first, talking to anybody from old civil rights activists like Ed King (a white Jacksonian who'd worked with Medgar Evers and who shared a home with one of Dixon Pyles's sons, Todd) to Richard Barrett, a New Jersey transplant who had made a name as Mississippi's most outspoken modern segregationist. Barrett had some useful thoughts about sources, but I should have been more careful. In an e-mail to Mostert, I mentioned him in connection with something he'd said about libel law. She sent the Hawkins daughters only a fragment of what I'd written, and for a long time they thought he and I might be colleagues on the extreme right. Given the nature of the McGee case, they wanted nothing to do with that.

I found the McGees in an equally roundabout way. After spending weeks trying to track them down without success, I wrote a letter to the editor of the *People's World*—a Chicago-based newspaper descended from the *Daily Worker*—hoping that some old-timer who remembered Rosalee McGee would call. Several months later, I got an e-mail from Bridgette McGee Robinson, a woman from Las Vegas who said she was Willie McGee's granddaughter. The *People's World* ran my letter online, so my name turned up in a Web search she'd done while looking into the case. She also told me about another relative who was interested: Tracey McGee, the granddaughter of McGee's late brother, Jasper McGee Jr.

I reached Tracey first. A longtime Bay Area resident, she said that she and Bridgette had only recently learned of each other's existence. Now they were doing research with an eye toward co-writing a family history about the case. She added that two of McGee's children, Willie Earl and Della, were still around, both of them living in Las Vegas. And then she left me hanging with a cryptic statement. "I have to tell you that some of the things people say about this case are wrong," she said.

Like what?

"I shouldn't talk about that on the phone. Can you get out to Las Vegas and talk to Bridgette and Della?"

My wife, Susan, and I made that trip in February 2005, traveling by car and arriving on a Friday night. The next morning, we rolled onto the endless pavement of North Las Vegas, following one of the city's racetrack boulevards, Camino Al Norte, and taking a series of quick turns that put us on a side street called Jose Leon. The street was in a quiet development of middle-class homes that baked blandly under the winter sun.

Bridgette, who was in her thirties, greeted us at a side-door entrance and took us into a small beige living room that merged with a dining room where she'd laid out finger food and drinks. She was plump, funny, and friendly, as was her husband, Harold, a cheerful man who came bounding off the couch to shake our hands. Willie Earl wasn't there. He either couldn't show up (because of health reasons) or didn't want to; I was never sure which. Della was on a couch, sitting silent and stone-faced. She was in her late sixties, but she hadn't retired. At the time, she was working at the Stardust Hotel.

We settled in around the table, Della at the far end, Harold on the couch, and Bridgette next to me and Susan, her pile of old newspaper stories and family photos within easy reach. She started showing us things, beginning with an old colorized photographic portrait of a light-skinned black woman. I'd never seen a picture of Rosalee McGee before and assumed this was she. But as Bridgette told me, the woman's name was Eliza Jane Payton McGee, and she, not Rosalee, was the mother of all of Willie McGee's children. There were four: Willie Earl, Della, Gracie Lee, and Mary. Bridgette and Della had never heard of an Adolphus or Marjorie. Whoever Adolphus and Marjorie were, they weren't part of this family.

The Eliza Jane Payton news was a stunner. Rosalee McGee—loyal wife, selfless mother, brave CRC spokesperson—had been central to how Willie's story was presented to the public during his appeals. She and Willie always acted as if the four children were theirs, and as if Rosalee had custody of them throughout the duration of the case. But Della said that she, her siblings, and her mother left Mississippi after McGee's arrest. Among other things, this meant the "Gracie Lee" letter to President Truman was faked.

Why did Rosalee and Willie lie about their relationship?

Bridgette and Della didn't know, but solving this mystery was very important to them. To Della, Rosalee was an identity thief, and she said there had been an episode long ago—she couldn't remember when—in which Rosalee had tried to collect Social Security payments that belonged to McGee's biological children.

While we all puzzled over this, Bridgette asked Della if she thought Rosalee might have been a girlfriend of Willie's rather than a wife. Apparently, he got around. "Couldn't it have been possible," Bridgette said, "that he was going with...whatever, Willameeta, whatever her name was—"

"The woman that he was supposed to rape?" Della said.

"...That he was going with her, and then he could have been going with a black woman too? And he could have been with grandma. He was that type of man."

There was no particular response to that. Maybe Della didn't want to talk about what type of man he was in front of me. I tried an easier question, asking if she had clear memories of him. She was in grade school when he was arrested in 1945.

"Um...hmm, I remember him," she said.

"Can you tell me what was he like?" I mentioned that, in one account I'd read, McGee was depicted as being simpleminded, but that this didn't seem right. I'd seen a picture of him published in *Life*. He didn't look mentally impaired.

"He wasn't that," she said. Then she abruptly started talking about Mrs. Hawkins. "What I was told, as a young woman in my twenties, was that he and this lady were going together and they got caught. And that's when they had her say rape." She tried to think of who told her this but couldn't.

“Because you see, in them days, you couldn’t go with no white woman,” she said. “Not down in Mississippi.”

Bridgette cut in with a theory I hadn’t heard before: that McGee and Mrs. Hawkins had had a child together—the twenty-month-old girl, who supposedly was conceived during their affair. The reason McGee crawled into Willette’s room that night, she said, was to visit his own offspring. Bridgette said the baby was starting to show “the black heritage” and that this triggered the frame-up.

“So it shows up in this child?” I said.

“Yeah. But they wouldn’t allow that to be submitted into the trial.”

That sounded far-fetched, and it was the first example of something I would encounter often as I learned more about the McGee case: Somewhere along the line, it stopped being only about verifiable facts. It had become a ghost story, a malleable myth whose realities, lessons, and undercurrents varied tremendously, depending on the perspective of the teller.

At the same time, it was a true story with a terrible ending: McGee lost his life in a humiliating public execution. Della wasn’t ready to open up to me about how it felt to have that in her past—I wondered if she ever would be—but Bridgette was less reticent. I asked her why she was doing this research and what she hoped to accomplish with it.

“I want it to be exposed,” she said. “I think it’s time. I want it to be exposed. I want the truth to be known. I know he wasn’t a perfect man. But if he was killed that way, I want it to be known.”

She said her mother, on her deathbed, had made Bridgette promise to keep looking into the case until she found out what really happened. She wasn’t sure yet what to do about the things she learned that was something she was praying over.

At this point, Harold cut in and asked, “Would there be something they would do as far as, um, the state of Mississippi maybe acknowledging that the trial was, like, pretty much set up?”

“That’s what we’re thinking,” Bridgette said. “I mean, we know half the people are dead that were involved in the trial. So we’re saying...it does not bring him back, but just the recognition that they committed a crime.... Because they never proved any rape. It was her word against his word.”

I went to Mississippi on my first research trip in the spring of 2005, driving from Santa Fe to Laurel, detouring south for a weekend-long stopover in pre-Katrina New Orleans. It wasn’t the smartest way to get there—total road time, twenty-two hours—but it was worth it. I love the terrain of southern Louisiana and Mississippi, where you can see everything from cypress swamps to blinding sun-and-sand panoramas to highway stretches where the trees are so thick and close that it feels like you’re spinning down a giant green hallway.

I took I-59 out of New Orleans on a Sunday afternoon, heading north and east through the west side of Mississippi’s boot heel, past small towns like Picayune, Poplarville, and Lumberton. The first real city you come to is Hattiesburg, followed by Laurel, which is only about 140 miles from New Orleans. I stopped long enough to drop my stuff at a hotel, then I drove to a place thirty miles farther north: a tiny town, a few miles off the interstate, called Pachuta. I had a fragment of an old newspaper story, published in an African-American newspaper in 1951, that said McGee was buried there somewhere.

In 1951, cemeteries were segregated, and I’d called ahead looking for a funeral home director who might know where the old black graveyards were. I found somebody in a nearby town, Quitman, who said the place I wanted was called Campbell’s. But he couldn’t give me directions. He just knew the name.

Where was Campbell’s? There was nothing in the phone book, so I started knocking on doors,

driving back and forth over country roads on a warm, soft-breezed spring afternoon. I banged on the door of a beat-up trailer home with a deputy sheriff's car parked out front. No answer. I startled a white man in the back office of an empty church. I went inside a convenience store and approached the first person I saw, a tall, heavy black woman in her fifties who was dressed in shorts, bedroom slippers, and a tentlike T-shirt.

"Campbell's?" she said, frowning and thinking. "Naw. Hold on." She rounded up every person in the place, as if I were on an important mission. "This man needs to find *Campbell's* cemetery. Anybody know?" Nobody knew. She looked perplexed that she couldn't help.

A few minutes later, I was driving around lost when I pulled up beside a middle-aged black man riding down a woodsy side road on a bike. He said he knew people who knew where Campbell's was, but could I give him two dollars first? Sure, I said. He pointed down the road and said to go that way and "look for the Jordans."

A half mile farther in, I found Cleaven Jordan, a short, wiry black man in his late sixties who was working on a car in front of a ranch house. Two younger men looked on and a small dog wiggled and whined as I rolled down the window to explain myself.

"Yeah, I know Campbell's," he said, tilting his head and smiling.

"But why do you want to find it?" I told him I was researching the Willie McGee case. Maybe he'd heard of it?

"Oh, yes," he said softly.

I talked on, telling him I'd recently met one of McGee's two surviving children and one of his granddaughters. They were gathering information, and we were sharing what we found out.

"OK," he said, as if that was all anybody needed to hear. "Well, the thing is, I know all about Willie McGee. So you might want to just pull over."

After I parked, Jordan walked us a few paces down the road, heading south, and then stopped. Standing there, which was nowhere in particular, he took a deep breath and started in on a capsule history of the case.

"Willie McGee was a man who liked women and they liked him," he began. "Along in there after the war, he got messed up with a white woman and her husband found out. So she called rape on Willie to save her own neck." I waited for more but that was it. He paused to try and retrieve additional details about where McGee was executed and buried.

"Hold on a second," he said, pulling out a cell phone. "I'm going to call my uncle. He might know something more."

The uncle said Campbell's wasn't the right place. He told Jordan to send me to a pair of rural church cemeteries a few miles west of the interstate. "He thinks he's in one of those," Jordan said cheerfully. "You have to remember that when people say Pachuta, they mean them little country places too."

Twenty minutes later, I pulled up to a redbrick Baptist church called Mt. Pleasant. Nobody was there and the chapel door was locked. In a big downward-sloping lawn behind the building, backed by a thicket of swishing hardwoods, pines, and scrub trees, sat an austere old graveyard. There were dozens of headstones scattered around, many inscribed with the name McGee: Cecil C. McGee, Father Burkie McGee Sr., Elzie Mae McGee. But no Willie McGee or Jasper McGee Sr.—Willie's father, who's supposed to be buried there near him. About a third of the graves were unmarked, nothing more than dents in the earth or sunken concrete slabs without headstone or label.

Was McGee in there? I inspected every grave I could find, crawling around to read hidden markers and finger worn lettering. Nothing. I felt sure he was, but he was still out of reach.

Over time, I was able to locate the materials I needed to understand the McGee case better—including a complete transcript of the first trial, which had been missing for years—but there were moments during that initial trip when it seemed like there were nothing left to find but rumors.

Early in the morning on Monday, I started out at the Jones County Courthouse, a two-story building made of brick and stone with tall entryway doors, wide hallways, and big wavy-paned old windows. The courthouse is positioned between Laurel's now depressed downtown and its nicest residential neighborhoods, streets built up during the city's bygone glory days as an agricultural-industrial center fueled by the harvesting and processing of pine trees. For block after block running north, the streets were lined with beautiful homes and a few outright mansions.

The courtroom where McGee died was locked, so I spent most of my time in a side room off the circuit clerk's office, a small, crowded space where the large bound ledgers of marriage licenses are kept. In McGee's time, the records were maintained separately by race, and I started with a ledger from the 1930s labeled MARRIAGE RECORD COLORED. It didn't take long to find the paperwork. McGee and Eliza Jane Payton got their license on April 15, 1935, when he was twenty-one and she was eighteen. She was from Collins, a small town twenty-seven miles to the west. Her parents were named Joe and Eliza Payton. McGee's parents were named Jasper and Bessie.

There was also a wedding license for Troy and Willette Hawkins, whose maiden name was Dorothy Willette Darnell. They were married on March 16, 1934, when he was twenty-five and she was twenty. Later that day, at the public library, I found a front-page story in the local newspaper, the *Laurel Leader-Call*, which explained what became of them: On March 25, 1967, Mrs. Hawkins was killed in a car accident inside the Laurel city limits, with Troy at the wheel. He survived the impact but died later at the hospital. There wasn't a word about the McGee case, and no picture of either of the deceased.

After looking at the licenses, I asked a clerk to bring me whatever she had on McGee. She came back with a folder containing a few scattered pages, including the original indictment, the witness list, verdict slips, and a motion for a continuance from the second trial, which was held in Hattiesburg after a judge ordered it moved out of Laurel. The lead defense lawyer for that one was Jackson-based attorney Dixon Pyles.

Pyles died in 2000, but later that day in Hattiesburg, I met one of his sons, Todd, a retired lawyer who was nice enough to drive down from Jackson and escort me to an archives building at the University of Southern Mississippi, where papers from Pyles's legal career are kept. The collection was still being processed and was off-limits to researchers, so Todd—a friendly man with a bushy moustache and a courtly Southern accent—spent an hour looking at the finding aid to see if the McGee case was referenced in there. He saw no sign of it.

“To tell you the truth, I don't think you're going to find it in here,” he said. “I think he would have given all that stuff to the next lawyer who worked the case.”

Later, the circuit clerk in Hattiesburg, a woman named Lou Ellen Adams, took me to an off-site storage facility where older court records were kept, material that was originally moved as a result of a courthouse fire years earlier. As she'd confided when I phoned her, I wasn't the first person to ask about McGee. One of Mrs. Hawkins's daughters had come through months before, looking for the second-trial transcript.

She didn't find it, and once we got to the facility I could see why. The site was a defunct commercial space in an old shopping center miles from the courthouse. The interior was dark and dusty; mildew in the air stung my throat. On makeshift shelves, in disintegrating boxes, and heaped on the floor in crazy piles, were thousands of old indictments and trial transcripts. It would have taken weeks to look at it all, so I gave up and left.

The next day, back in Laurel, I spent the morning with a sixty-four-year-old African-American woman named Evelyn Smith McDowell, whom I'd been introduced to by a local author named Cleveland Payne. Payne has written several books about the history of blacks in Laurel, and he said he thought McDowell was related to McGee—a distant cousin or something like that.

She lived in a poor part of town, in a long, run-down brick apartment building on the south side of the railroad tracks that split Laurel in two. After greeting me at her front door, she marched me straight through her apartment to a tiny outdoor patio, took a seat in the blazing morning sun, and started shouting answers to my questions. McDowell was short, heavy, and hard of hearing, and had lost most of her front teeth. She was wearing a shiny dirty-blond wig and a stretched-out gold T-shirt. She did most of the talking.

She started by telling me about a long-dead aunt who had owned a neighborhood grocery store when she was a child. "She lived at 239 South Eighth Avenue," she said, "and she was the first black lady that had a grocery market on that end of town." This aunt used to hold evening dances at the store, and Willie McGee, as a young man, would come to them. McDowell claimed to remember seeing him in the early 1940s, when she would have been, at most, a preschooler.

"What was he like?" I asked at one point.

"He was a soft-spoken person," she said. "To me, he was kinda shy. You would have to kinda force him into talking. He was handsome! But he was very neat. He had deep creases in his pants, he wore white, pretty shirts, and he smelled good all the time. Women liked that he was very clean and kept his hair cut. He was a very handsome man. He wasn't pretty, but he was handsome enough for you to notice.... The ladies were after him. He wasn't after them."

The story she'd heard about the affair represented yet another variation: McGee, she said, was having sex with both the white woman and the woman's maid. He went away for a while at some point—to Las Vegas or Los Angeles with a friend named T-Bone. When he returned, his plan was to marry the maid and move west, but the white woman wouldn't allow it. She didn't mind him messing around with the maid, but she would never let him leave the state.

"When the lady found out about Willie was having a personal affair with this black lady, it was all well and good as long as it was going to be here in Mississippi," Evelyn said. "But when they decided to leave and go to California together, she got all upset about this rape thing."

I told her I'd heard that everybody in the black sections of Laurel knew the affair was going on.

"Yeah, we *did* know. Everybody knew, but wasn't nothing we could do about it."

"How did they know?"

"Hey, they would be out in the car, and she'd be kissing him! They would come down through here and there wasn't anything anybody could do about it, because this is what she wanted to do."

"But wasn't that dangerous?"

"Not really. At that particular time, whatever white people said was all right.... The only way you'd get lynched was if she hollers about that you raped her.... If you were black and I was white, as long as I didn't bother saying you were trying to rape me, it was all right."

McDowell also talked about the execution, which happened when she was nine. On the afternoon of May 7, 1951, she darted around in downtown Laurel, staying out of the way but peeking here and there to see what was going on. "It was just like something was waiting to happen," she said, with awe in her voice. "It wasn't noisy, it wasn't nobody demonstrating anything. But you could *feel* it, the tension in the air."

McDowell didn't go near the courthouse that night, but she said she clearly remembered that the lights in her part of town went out every time the current was applied to the electric chair, a signal to

the downtrodden blacks of Laurel about what would happen if they crossed the line. That didn't sound possible—the chair was powered by a generator—but I shut up and listened. McDowell went on to say that, the next day, black schoolchildren, including her, were taken in groups to “the Pete Christian funeral home” to view McGee's body. This was done to teach them a lesson.

“My third-grade teacher, Miss Della Hodge, had us children all in line, and we was just like a couple of ducks, walking across the street,” she said. “They had us to go and look. They said, ‘This is an example to black boys, if they mess with white women.’”

“I was terrified,” she said. “You could see that he was a human being, but he was just like a piece of charcoal. He was just black, black, black—burnt black.”

The following Sunday, at a bookstore in a suburban shopping center in Jackson, I finally met two of the Hawkins sisters: Sandra, the middle daughter and the person who had kept in contact with Mary Mostert, and Dorothy, who was the baby in the bed on the night of the rape. They agreed to meet me after I sent a long e-mail explaining my interest in the case and how I proposed to handle researching it.

Dorothy lived in Mississippi; Sandra was passing through with her husband. Both sisters were in their sixties, and both were the kind of tastefully dressed Southern women I'd seen a thousand times before. I had aunts, now mostly gone, who looked like both of them.

Even before we sat down, I knew which one was Sandra thanks to a high-school yearbook photo I'd found in Laurel. A former majorette, she had big eyes and a friendly face and a manner that made her easy to talk to. Dorothy was more closed-off, though she opened up some as we talked. When I could, I sneaked glances at her, looking for outward signs of “the black heritage.” There weren't any.

Dorothy worked in a public school system and was nearing retirement, one of several reasons why she was leery about discussing the McGee case in any kind of media context. In tune with that, I didn't take notes. They were interviewing me, not vice versa, and during a two-hour grilling about my motives, I felt as if I were making, at best, modest progress toward getting them to believe that I could tell their story without bias. Richard Barrett came up early on, and they accepted my explanation about him. The harder part was convincing them that I wasn't a professional liar. Journalists weren't high on their list of trustworthy people.

Dorothy, especially, seemed scarred by having lived with the case. At one point, she asked if I had any idea where the McGee children were. When I said yes, she looked shocked and went silent. She didn't ask for additional details.

Though meeting the sisters was difficult, it was a valuable reminder of how explosive the case still was for both families. Like Bridgette, the Hawkins sisters believed that they owed it to their parents' memory to correct lies about who they really were, yet they were smart enough to see how risky it was for them to go anywhere near this subject. After all, their side won: McGee was put to death. Half a century later, who would want to listen to a couple of Deep South white women complain that their mother got a raw deal?

By the time we parted company, I had no idea what they were thinking. Eventually, they did decide to talk to me, but that didn't happen for more than a year. As those months went by and we sporadically kept in touch, I started to believe that they would eventually choose to talk. To do nothing would mean, by default, condemning their mother to an eternal reputation as an adulteress, liar, and murderer. Sandra, for one, couldn't tolerate that. As she put it to me later in an e-mail: “My mother was a victim. She's become the accused.”

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