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PRIMARY SOURCES

Melvin Wali Ali Feiler Meyer:
A Student's Struggle with Insider/Outsider
Status in Civil Rights-Era Alabama

by

Dina Weinstein *

“A Bell Rang,”

Editorial, *Crimson White*, September 27, 1962

The year 2013 marks the fiftieth anniversary of the integration of the University of Alabama. During the 1962–1963 academic school year, twenty-year-old Melvin Feiler Meyer held the post of editor of the university's student newspaper, the *Crimson White*. His tenure in that position began with a departure from typical articles covering clubs, fraternities, and sports. On September 27, 1962, he ran an editorial taking an ethical and moral stand for integration at the University of Mississippi and, by extension, the University of Alabama.¹ Blowback from that editorial made Meyer's year a terror-filled but also exhilarating ride. Black-and-white photos of Meyer from the University of Alabama student yearbook, the *Corolla*, depict a serious, clean-cut, dark haired college student in a suit and tie posed with a manual typewriter.² Running the flowery, political editorial would mark Meyer as a radical, an outsider, and a champion of civil rights and free speech. This was not an image he had cultivated, but rather a role he grew into.

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Racially integrated schools bucked the accepted order in Alabama and Mississippi. But the 1954 *Brown v. the Board of Education* U.S. Supreme Court ruling barred segregation in public educational institutions and brought black students to formerly segregated schools throughout the South. The equal opportunity message in the *Crimson White* riled segregationists. Meyer's Jewish religion also made him a target as the segregated way of life was slowly upturned. That outsider role continued through his life.

Today, Meyer is a resident of San Francisco, California, and a Sufi teacher. He wears his wavy, snow-white hair in a ponytail that reaches past his shoulders. A light drawl still flavors his speech. He smiles readily, revealing a gap between his top front teeth. Now known as Murshid Wali Ali, he directs the San Francisco, California-based Esoteric School of the Sufi Ruhaniat International, where he teaches Sufism, Dharma, and Dances and Walks training. Sufism is generally understood to be the inner, mystical, or psycho-spiritual dimension of Islam. Dharma is a Hindu and Buddhist doctrine of the universal truth common to all individuals at all times. Dances and Walks is a physical and artistic, folk-dance-like spiritual practice.³ Never having converted to Islam, Meyer still considers himself a Jew.

Meyer's training and status was achieved after years of following Samuel L. Lewis, who was also Jewish but whose teachings drew from many spiritual traditions. Meyer connected with Lewis in San Francisco in the late 1960s while Meyer pursued graduate studies at Vanderbilt University. The counterculture was blooming, and Meyer grew as a spiritual leader during the 1960s and 1970s.⁴ After working as a teacher at a progressive school in the South, Meyer embraced the counterculture lifestyle while studying and teaching Sufi philosophy with Lewis at his Esoteric School in San Francisco. Meyer reflects that the experience of publishing the editorial and the subsequent antisemitic backlash, plus his interest in philosophy, led him toward this unconventional path.⁵

Primary sources document Meyer's jarring journey during his key school year and tell the bigger story of his insider/outsider status as a Jew from Mississippi. Present-day interviews with Meyer show how taking an editorial stand for integration with all

its repercussions shaped Meyer profoundly and laid a basis for opening him to ideas that dramatically veered him away from his upbringing in the 1940s and 1950s in the segregated South.

On September 20, 1962, the entire country, including students like Meyer, watched as James Meredith made a first attempt to register at the University of Mississippi campus in Oxford, Mississippi. Governor Ross Barnett personally blocked Meredith's way. Students and others rioted in opposition to integration at Ole Miss.

Meyer and his classmates at the University of Alabama knew that integration would soon come to their institution. Many believed that they could not violently respond as students and non-students did at Ole Miss and as University of Alabama students and Tuscaloosa residents had done in 1956 when Autherine Lucy first attempted to integrate their institution. The *Crimson White* editorial, which Meyer said was actually penned by a friend but for which he was held responsible, demonstrates that many in Alabama understood integration to be a human rights issue. The language in the editorial is thoughtful, considering many sides of the argument that James Meredith deserved an education at Mississippi's capstone institution. The *Crimson White* was a student platform, and the author of the editorial, titled "A Bell Rang," was speaking to his contemporaries. But he was also speaking to the university community, and the editorial was a comment on the values of the greater community. School integration was an issue that marked this generation of students, and "A Bell Rang" directly addressed the challenge.

Growing Up in Mississippi

Meyer was aware of and repelled by the segregated structure of life in his hometown of Starkville, Mississippi. He recalls separate water fountains in government buildings.⁶ Nonetheless, he was not attuned to the civil rights protests taking place. Numerous social protests occurred in Alabama in 1962, from a judge ordering desegregation of the Montgomery library and museum to marches and demonstrations by Talladega black and white college students to a petition delivered to Birmingham officials to remove all racial signs and eliminate racial job barriers.⁷

Meyer did not become active in these struggles. He never belonged to student civil rights organizations like the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee (SNCC) or the Congress of Racial Equality (CORE) that had filled the freedom rider buses in 1961. Northern Jews were well represented on the freedom rides that passed through Alabama and finished in Mississippi with the goal of enforcing integrated interstate travel. Many Jewish and gentile southerners, however, viewed the riders as outside agitators despite the fact that many of the riders were southerners. Jews who participated were moved to act because of the injustices suffered by blacks in the South under the Jim Crow system. Many, like San Francisco-based freedom rider Alexander Weiss, were the same age as Meyer. Weiss told Eric Etheridge, author of *Breach of Peace: Portraits of the 1961 Mississippi Freedom Riders*, that the discriminatory situation seemed similar to how his Austrian refugee father had suffered, and for that reason Weiss refused to stand on the sidelines.⁸ European persecution of Jews climaxing in the Holocaust was not, however, Meyer's motivation for running the pro-integration editorial. Meyer believed that the moral argument for equal opportunity made sense under the Constitution, whereas discrimination did not.⁹

Standing with integrationists was complicated for Jews in the South. Jackson, Mississippi, rabbi Perry Nussbaum had secretly visited jailed Jewish freedom riders the previous summer at Parchman Penitentiary. His congregation disapproved of the outside agitators who dropped in, made waves, and then left. Jewish representation at these rides and marches made local southern Jews uncomfortable because they would be linked to their coreligionists and potentially face a backlash from the white Protestant society.¹⁰

Meyer describes his upbringing in Starkville as a traditional, middle-class one complete with African American household help. His family attended the Reform B'nai Israel congregation in Columbus, Mississippi. Despite deep family roots in the region, Meyer recalls growing up Jewish in the 1940s and 1950s as awkward. He felt like an outsider, an "extraterrestrial." A Christian classmate drove home Meyer's marginal status when the first-

grade student asked him why he killed Christ.¹¹ Meyer's sister, Marjorie Meyer Goldner, remembers understanding her differences, but fitting in.¹²

Meyer recalls that acculturated southern Jews strove to avoid the "New York, loudmouth, kike" stereotype.¹³ That description served as code among genteel southern Jews for not calling attention to differences. But this was too late for Meyer. Hank Black, a college friend who was Meyer's successor as managing editor at the *Crimson White*, describes Meyer as someone who loved a philosophical argument and was often confrontational.¹⁴ Meyer studied in the university's honors program. His superior intellect made him both impeccable and suspect. His powerful post, challenging personality, and Jewish faith positioned Meyer as both a hero and a villain for his stance.

The Editorial

"A Bell Rang," published on page 4 of the *Crimson White*, was unsigned as per editorial policy. That the *Crimson White* staff approached the issue of integration is noteworthy in itself. Black, then the managing editor, recalled that student staffers did not take on off-campus political topics. Typical topics included pep rallies, the military's Reserve Officers' Training Corps (ROTC) program, Greek life, and the athletic feats of the Crimson Tide football team and their star athlete, Joe Namath, as well as a regular 'Bama Belle photograph featuring a bouffant-haired coed from sorority row. The September 27, 1962, issue of the *Crimson White* was only the third newspaper edition Meyer had led, having inaugurated his term as editor with the last edition of the previous school year. His previous editions' staff editorials focused on the same sort of parochial issues as his predecessors', stating editorial policy and denouncing parking policies as unfair and fraternity rush as archaic.¹⁵ The one exception to this rule appeared the previous week when the columnist writing as "The Mad Hatter" poked fun at a local White Citizens Council screening of the white supremacist film, *Birth of a Nation*.¹⁶ Otherwise, there was little to signal the politicized direction Meyer's editorship was about to take.

The editorial begins with the words of the folk song, "If I had a Hammer," made popular by singers Peter, Paul, and Mary, who visited the campus later that year. The author makes a moral and ethical argument for why Meredith should be admitted to the University of Mississippi. In the editorial, the use of the collective pronoun "we" in phrases like "We are concerned" gives the impression that the writer is representing the opinions of the entire newspaper staff.

The editorial provides many indications that the writer is accustomed to building arguments and considering various viewpoints. In fact, Robbie Roberts, one of Meyer's classmates on the debate team and on the *Crimson White* editorial board, was the author.¹⁷ Nonetheless, Meyer reflects that he received both credit and blame.¹⁸ Meyer and Roberts kept Roberts's identity secret as a matter of editorial policy and because Roberts's father was a public school teacher, and Roberts believed that his father would be threatened. "I liked the way it was written, and it seemed to coincide with my moral sense of what was right," Meyer recently told a reporter for the *Crimson White*. "It was something I was willing to take a stand for."¹⁹

In the editorial, Roberts quotes journalist P. D. East to make the argument that if bias is allowed to keep out one group, other minorities will be next. "If I were a Catholic in Mississippi, I'd be worried," East wrote. "If I were a Jew, I'd be scared stiff. If I were a Negro, I would already be gone."²⁰ East was a social critic who "represented the small, and generally cautious, segment of white southern society that recognized, and tried to change, the racial injustice that defined the South in the first half of the twentieth century."²¹ East established the *Petal Paper* newspaper in 1953 in Petal, Mississippi, and used it as a forum to promote his belief that African Americans should, and must, receive fair treatment and legal equality. By 1959, his caustic editorials and liberal racial views resulted in the loss of local subscribers and advertisers. However, the *Petal Paper* survived with sporadic publication until 1971 through donations and subscriptions from liberal supporters in other areas of the country.

Melvin Meyer, editor of the Crimson White.

Editorial Board of the Crimson White.

*Left to right: Harve Mossawir, Robbie Roberts, and Melvin Meyer.
(Photos from the Corolla year book, 1963, courtesy of the W. S. Hoole
Special Collections Library, University of Alabama, Tuscaloosa.)*

*Front page, Crimson White, September 27, 1962,
the day the editorial ran on page 4.
(Courtesy of University of Alabama Digital Collections,
William Stanley Hoole Special Collections Library, Tuscaloosa.)*

The *Crimson White* editorial asserts that it is wrong that justice and freedom were denied to Meredith. The doors of higher education institutions must be open to all, Roberts writes. He employs the famous line from John Donne, the English metaphysical poet: "No man is an island, entire of itself; every man is a piece of the continent, a part of the main. . . . I am involved in mankind; and therefore never send to know for whom the bell tolls; it tolls for thee." Thus the readers are implicated and made personally responsible for justice and the correct execution of civil rights as promised in the U.S. Constitution. The editorial's last line completes this thought by recalling Woody Guthrie's protest folk song, "This Land Was Made For You and Me."

The eloquent bell imagery is especially poignant for the University of Alabama. The Denny Chimes bell tower is an iconic landmark on the campus quad, ringing every quarter hour.

University Desegregation in the Deep South

The editorial provided a measured response to a very violent scene at the University of Mississippi. Two days after the editorial ran, on September 29, 1962, President John F. Kennedy issued a proclamation calling on the government and the people of Mississippi to "cease and desist" their obstructive actions and "disperse and retire peaceably forthwith."²² The crowd at the university turned violent, and authorities struggled to maintain order. The federal government intervened, and James Meredith registered for classes on October 1, 1962. The following August, he became the first black graduate from the university.²³

Societal rules were being bent. Tempers ran high. Word of the editorial got out, and the *Crimson White* staff began to receive threats. "All hell broke loose," is how Meyer describes what happened after he ran the pro-integration editorial.²⁴

E. Culpepper Clark, in *The Schoolhouse Door: Segregation's Last Stand at the University of Alabama*, comprehensively documents the institution's attempt to stop, then delay, and finally deal diplomatically with integration. Meyer's short presence in the seven-year epic battle to integrate Alabama's capstone educational institution is defined by the student editor's insider status as a southerner and

a high achieving honors student and his outsider status as a Jew and thus one suspect of foreign, even communist ideas. Targeting a Jewish student editor for running a pro-integration editorial was not a difficult jump for many. Historian Clive Webb observes: "The civil rights crisis sparked an explosion of anti-Semitic extremism across the South. Segregationists accused 'Communist Jews' of having masterminded a conspiracy to destroy democratic government in the region."²⁵ Clark writes that the university viewed the editorial's dissent as something that could be dealt with by dismissing the editor and censoring the content of the student newspapers.²⁶

B. J. Hollars has written a wide-ranging account of the University of Alabama's 1956 and 1963 desegregation attempts, as well as the little-known story of the civil rights movement in Tuscaloosa. His book, *Opening the Doors: The Desegregation of the University of Alabama and the Fight for Civil Rights in Tuscaloosa*, focuses on what he terms the "secret history behind UA's desegregation." He describes it more as a process that proved successful due to the concerted efforts of dedicated individuals including student leaders, a progressive university president, a steadfast administration, and secret negotiations between the Justice Department, White House, and Alabama's stubborn governor George Wallace. Hollars thinks Meyer's story exemplifies how one person can make a difference by taking a stand.²⁷ Hollars's recounting of the many activists, administrators, and student leaders who shaped individual and collective organization toward a peaceful integration shows that Meyer was not alone. However, Meyer faced unique threats because of his religion. Standing up for integration would not just categorize Meyer as a traitor to the white race, but peg him as an outsider. Attacks took a clearly antisemitic tone. Hollars writes that smaller actions paved the way for integration. Those actions included administrators removing Coke bottle machines and any debris on campus that could be thrown during potential rioting and enlisting student leaders to calm the population and act as ambassadors to the trailblazing first black students.²⁸

Documenting Meyer's Role

The primary and related documents cited in this article depict Meyer's personal experience grappling with the violent reaction to the editorial and his polarizing status. This article goes beyond and in far greater depth concerning Meyer's experience than the previous historical accounts. A fuller picture emerges through first hand interviews with Meyer and his family, colleagues, and friends from the University of Alabama. Further reading of the *Crimson White* from 1962 and 1963 renders a clearer understanding of Meyer's insider/outsider status and of southern society. A Meyer family album assembled by Meyer's mother, Mildred, and archived at Mississippi State University, shows Meyer's personal achievements that year, as well as the threats and accolades he received following the running of the "A Bell Rang" editorial and his stand in support of it.²⁹

Explorations of the southern Jewish experience during the civil rights era and the tensions of this group's insider/outsider status are described at length in *Fight Against Fear*, where Clive Webb writes, "Those who dared to protest against racial prejudice risked serious personal injury."³⁰ Webb's book describes the experiences of Jews who were considered leaders and others who did not fit that category. It clearly demonstrates that taking a stand on integration and civil rights was a personal choice for Jews in the South, one that came with much personal risk. Jews had a justified fear of being real targets as a minority. Just four years before the editorial, a number of bombings occurred at synagogues and Jewish community centers in the region. Jewish merchants, who owned many of the segregated dry goods and department stores in the South, were on the front lines of the protest movement, caught between segregationists and integrationists. The many community portraits depicted in *The Quiet Voices: Southern Rabbis and Black Civil Rights, 1880s to 1990s*, edited by Mark Bauman and Berkley Kalin, describe the various tacks southern rabbis took as leaders and the varying degrees of support they received from their congregations.³¹ Many pro-integration rabbis in the South looked to the teaching of the biblical prophets for guiding princi-

ples for ethical decisions on the moral high road. Rabbis described in *The Quiet Voices* often acted as representatives of the local Jewish community.

Meyer did not share this motivation and did not see himself as a representative of the Jewish community. He admits his Reform Jewish education was limited. In printing "A Bell Rang," Meyer communicated for the majority view of the student newspaper's editorial board. The editorial's moral and ethical argument is not directly drawn from Jewish prophetic writings.³² Meyer was no doubt a leader. His strong sense of journalistic integrity and developing sense of philosophical precepts and ethical theory drove his decision to run the editorial. He was a brash young opinion setter in the face of slow-moving change in an environment of rage.

Meyer family scrapbooks, or albums, include documents of Melvin's and his older sister Marjorie's academic careers in pursuit of advanced degrees at the University of Alabama. The first scrapbook's thirty-five pages document the year 1960 when Meyer began studying at the University of Alabama and worked at the *Crimson White* in the news and rewrite department and then as a sports writer. The second album, one hundred pages long, documents Meyer's wild ride assuming the post of student editor during the 1962-1963 academic year. It includes articles in the state and national press regarding the running of the "A Bell Rang" editorial and about Meyer receiving threats and praise for the act, as well as coverage of the guards paid by the University of Alabama to protect Meyer from harm. Also in the album are Meyer's writings about the experience for a student press association, transcripts, correspondence pertaining to applying and being accepted to graduate school, and documentation of his participation in other student activities.

A clipping from the *Birmingham News* in the second album from October 14, 1962, with the headline "Crimson-White editor gets threats after UM editorial" reports that a cross was burned in front of Meyer's fraternity house and that Meyer had received threatening phone calls. Fraternity brother Joseph J. "Skipper" Levin, Jr., remembers angry callers to the Zeta Beta Tau fraternity

house shouting to whomever answered: "Nigger lover!"³³ The antisemitic criticism of Meyer reverberated at his Jewish fraternity. Meyer recalls being a pariah at Zeta Beta Tau for making the fraternity a target of hate.³⁴ He recounts that much of the hate mail he received was antisemitic.³⁵ Meyer and Levin tell this tale of terror in a factual, almost lighthearted way as if to say: "Can you believe this happened to me?" The retelling is mixed with a sense that hate was a known behavior that, despite Jews adhering to conformity of the white cultural norms, could descend randomly or when those norms were questioned or deviated from. Meyer and Levin also conveyed a sense of the reality that, despite great efforts to acculturate and conform, being Jewish in the Deep South set one apart, and with that came the risk of ostracism in social settings and even this shocking extreme of targeting.

*Pledge Class, Zeta Beta Tau, University of Alabama, 1960.
Melvin Meyer is in middle row, second from left;
Joseph Levin is front row, second from right.
(Courtesy of Joseph L. Levin.)*

Clive Webb wrote, "Anti-Semitic extremists seized the opportunity to portray Jews as the masterminds behind the integration movement."³⁶ A six-page *Fiery Cross* newsletter, the official publication of the Knights of the Ku Klux Klan, dated November 17, 1961, and filed in the Meyer family album, shouts the headline: "KU KLUX KLAN Declares WAR! Against Negro-Jew Communism." A section of the rambling article titled "Forward the Klan" reads: "The evil scheme of the jew [*sic*] to overthrow the American Government cannot be denied by any just man. Therefore, they are traitors, and they are not American. Their supreme loyalty, by their own admission, is to ONE WORLD JEWRY with the gentile white man branded as their slaves. It is so written in their foul Talmud law."³⁷

*Ku Klux Klan
Fiery Cross
November 17, 1961.
(Courtesy of Henry Meyer
Papers, Mitchell Memorial
Library, Special
Collections,
Mississippi State
University, Starkville.)*

One letter written in loopy cursive from Chicago, Illinois, dated November 14, 1962, reads:

Hello Jew, I see in the papers that some red-blooded Americans down there are out to get you. Well you asked for it, you and all the sneaking undermining [*sic*] Jews who are at work in this country trying to break it apart so it can be handed to your communist friends in Moscow. It makes me sick to see you dirty Jews going around pretending to be Americans. Someday soon the white people of this county will cleanse themselves of scum like you.

The letter goes on for three more paragraphs and is signed "Seig Heil! A Nazi!"³⁸

Both hate letters and letters of support illustrating the range of opinions and emotions of the era are included in the family album. A typed letter signed W. D. Archer of Mobile, Alabama, dated October 6, 1962, reads:

Your editorial "A Bell Rang . . ." renews my faith in right eventually prevailing. Right could prevail now, if those adults who respect law and order and whose religion really has some meaning, will have the same courage that your Editorial Staff has demonstrated in daring to stand up for principles that seem to have lost their meaning to a great number of people at a time when they are most needed.

We still have a wonderful government—we have the form of a wonderful religion. Perhaps, it will take the youth of America to give them spirit again. Without spirit, neither our government nor our religion can live.

Another typed letter directed to Meyer's mother from Virginia H. Thorpe at the Air Base in Columbus, Mississippi, had a congratulatory tone. Dated October 15, 1962, the original was written entirely in capital letters. It follows here with all its errors:

You don't know me, or I you, or your son but I do want to congradulate you and him on his courageous stand in this James Meredith and "Ole Miss." situation. It takes a lot of character to champion such an unpopular cause. I realize that he didn't state anything but the right of James Meredith to go to the school of his choise and its moral and legal justification

but this is something that I never expected to see in a boy from Starkville. I know that a lot of the credit for such a fine boy goes to the mother and father who raised him and I only hope that I can do such a fine job with my 3 year old son. I know your mothers heart swelled with pride when he took his open stand in this cause. . . . He may lose some so called friends and I know that his path will be rocky from here on but I think what self respect he has gained. As I grow older I realize more every day what a great thing this is (self respect I mean) and how it gives us courage and fortitude in later life. This one thing, is what I hope to instill in my son. Not to be a sheep and follow the leader because that is the easiest way and the thing to do, but to have his own opinions and his own course of action independent of groups. I am trying to teach him even now that he must not be small and petty in his relations with other people. I am keeping the article on your son's editorial to show him graphically what I mean to stand in the face of popular opinion for something that you believe in. . . . I hope that you will send my best wishes to your boy and I am sure that they will be only one of the very many he will receive.³⁹

A telegram from Larry C. Jackson, student body president of the Tuskegee Institute and dated December 13, 1962, reads:

TUSKEGEE STUDENTS HAVE READ WITH GREAT INTEREST THE ACCOUNT OF YOUR ACTION. WE SALUTE YOU FOR YOUR GALLANT STAND AND PLEDGE OUR SUPPORT TO YOU.⁴⁰

Such a statement of support from the students of the all-black college must have been especially meaningful and gratifying for Meyer.

State and National Reaction

Following the publication of the editorial and the subsequent response, Meyer turned inward to his small circle of friends: student journalists, philosophers, and artists. He remained with the newspaper and continued to be called on the rug by the university administration for his coverage of events. The hateful responses also jarred Meyer's fraternity brother, Joe Levin, from an existence he classifies as complacent to one of uncomfortable awareness of

hate. Levin bristled at hearing Jews both in the fraternity and in his hometown of Montgomery critical of Meyer's stand.

The University of Alabama clamped down on the *Crimson White* staff. Meyer remembers the university censoring the newspaper's articles after September 27, 1962. The implications of the editorial rippled beyond the campus.⁴¹

After he ran the editorial, Meyer's family also became targets. Not only did the Klan burn a cross on the lawn of his University of Alabama Zeta Beta Tau Jewish fraternity house, but also on his parents' lawn in Starkville, Mississippi. Meyer's family felt further repercussions when Oktibbeha, Mississippi, county officials pulled their business from Henry Meyer's printing company when he refused to denounce his son's editorial.⁴² The Meyers did not tell their son about the pressure, loss of business, or about the hate crime that ruined a rose trellis. They did not want that to influence their son's journalistic integrity. The hate crime especially hurt, as it pegged the Meyers as outsiders, even though Henry Meyer had championed the betterment of Starkville as newspaper editor.⁴³

On November 14, 1962, the *New York Times* reported that the University of Alabama had hired two private detectives, former police officers, to protect Melvin Meyer. Ten days later, the *New York Times* printed an article headlined: "Alabama Acts to Bar Violence at University—Negro's Application to School is Expected Next Term, Leaders Urge Governor-Elect to Back Law and Order."⁴⁴

The *New York Times* article devoted three paragraphs to Meyer. It explained that the editorial created consternation. The article notes that Tuscaloosa served as national headquarters for the United Klans of America, Knights of the Ku Klux Klan, Inc., and home to Robert M. Shelton, a former Tuscaloosa rubber plant worker and the Klan's imperial wizard. Meyer told the *New York Times* reporter that he received anonymous telephone threats telling him "that if the student did not leave town within 24 hours the Klan would see that he left 'in a pine box.'"⁴⁵

The student editor felt immune from threats. He indicates that he saw it all as a joke because of his youth. He saw the gram-

*Above: Telegram from Larry C. Jackson, president of the Tuskegee Institute Student Body. Below: Letter from Virginia H. Thorpe.
(Courtesy of Henry Meyer Papers, Mitchell Memorial Library, Special Collections, Mississippi State University, Starkville.)*

matical mistakes and garbled syntax in the hate mail and viewed the writers as uneducated people.⁴⁶ Meyer would have been at an even bigger risk had he taken these views of equality and equal opportunity further with outreach like voter registration drives conducted by the subsequently murdered Jewish 1964 Freedom Summer volunteers Michael Schwerner and Andrew Goodman and their African American co-worker, James Chaney, among many others. Meyer's insider status may have protected him even while many whites reacted angrily to the editorial.⁴⁷

Nonetheless the university's move to protect Meyer was justified. The United Klans of America was notorious for numerous acts of brutality including a number of murders.⁴⁸ The James C. Bennett papers, housed in the University of Alabama's W. S. Hoole Special Collections Library, contain reports filed by former police officers referred to as operatives.⁴⁹ The reports demonstrate that the guards spotted real danger: night riders circling Meyer's off-campus apartment.⁵⁰

As the administration backed off, Meyer opined on student journalists' right to press freedom in the October 10, 1962, edition of the *Crimson White*.⁵¹ Meyer's standing behind the "A Bell Rang" editorial led to recognition from his peers. Clippings in his family album from February 28, 1963, in the *Crimson White* and in many other newspapers, reported that Meyer was named college Editor of the Year by the U.S. Student Press Association.⁵²

Outside organizations invited Meyer to speak, and the album documents the growing attention focused on him. He sat on a panel concerning press freedom that winter, for example, at the Columbia University Graduate School of Journalism. Yet he remained wary of outsiders. Once, when a group of students from the University of Chicago called him to ask what they could do for the civil rights movement on a weekend in the South, Meyer told them to stay in their city and work to better it.⁵³ Meyer detailed the censorship and tension at the *Crimson White* in an article for the spring 1963 edition of the *Journal of the Student Press* titled, "Alabama Crisis." He wrote:

During the weeks immediately following the editorial, I began to have a pretty good idea of what the inside of the president's office looked like. I was called in for "counseling sessions" about twice every day. In the course of these lengthy sessions I was forcefully impressed with the point of view that the University could not afford a truly free student newspaper. . . . With this in mind they read all *Crimson White* copy and censored the next week all the Letters to the Editor, and a review of Carlton Putnam's "Race and Reason" by a University anthropologist. . . . So I resolved either to have complete freedom or resign. . . . [W]e now have editorial freedom in the real sense of the word—freedom to comment meaningfully on significant issues. But the whole series of events underlines one basic point—if you value real freedom of the press, you are under an obligation to fight for it.⁵⁴

The *Crimson White* staffers continued writing their first take on history and documenting the integration process at the University of Alabama. Ultimately, Meyer was considered too much of a lightning rod. He believes that his selection as a Peace Corps summer intern in Washington, D.C., was a careful choice to get him off campus while black students were scheduled to register. In a recent interview Meyer said he was comfortable in his new role as a symbol of the ethical and moral high ground of integration. Meyer reflected on the experience in an e-mail:

When I was thrust into the public spotlight as a focus of the battle for de-segregation, I looked deep into myself and felt very much at home with the editorial view that our newspaper had taken. Something rose in me as a response to gladly step forward and represent these ideals. I genuinely liked this feeling. At the same time I had a relatively small circle of friends who I could really rely on. And with the cross burnings, and the hate mail, and the "operatives" who were veterans of Bull Connor's Birmingham Police Force, a certain amount of mature caution was required.

But probably the deepest way the experience affected me was in the deepening of my heart's feeling nature and thus finding deeper empathy and relationship with peoples whom I had never thought too much about before.

One story tells it all in a nutshell. I drove home to Starkville over the spring holiday at Alabama. On the way I stopped at a roadside place for a coffee and overheard two local fellows who were already seated in a nearby booth having some negative opinions about me. It didn't affect me very much but I was glad to leave. While I was home my mother asked me to go over to Cora's in one of the black neighborhoods and take the wash that my mother wished her to do. I had no relationship with Cora. When I stopped my car and got out an old woman comes running out of her house. She is crying and trying to talk at the same time. "Mr. Melvin, Mr. Melvin they're going to let Mr. Meredith back into Ole Miss. They're going to let him back in!" And here she had to break down and cry—tears of relief for such an unheard of event—feelings that she felt comfortable to share with me because she trusted where my heart was.⁵⁵

Postscript

While Meyer was away in Washington, D.C., serving as a Peace Corps intern, the status quo changed at the University of Alabama. In June 1963, Vivian J. Malone and James A. Hood became the first African Americans to sustain enrollment at the university. This second attempt to integrate the university was peaceful in comparison to the riots that accompanied Autherine Lucy's enrollment, due in large part to the university's meticulous planning of the event. However, then-Governor George Wallace had vowed in his inaugural address to "stand in the schoolhouse door" if necessary to prevent federal authorities from integrating any school in the state. True to his word, Wallace stood in front of Foster Auditorium on June 11, 1963, when Malone and Hood arrived to register for classes. Ordered to "cease and desist" by a proclamation from President Kennedy, Wallace refused to step aside for more than four hours until Brigadier General Henry Graham of the Thirty-first Division of the National Guard enforced the presidential order.⁵⁶

The primary and related documents investigated for this article demonstrate that the following year Meyer left the *Crimson White*. His transcript shows high grades in courses in western

culture and the philosophy of religion. Meyer says he dipped into antiwar protests.⁵⁷ In his last semester at the University of Alabama he did not shrink away. He took the Graduate Record Exam and applied to graduate schools to further his studies in philosophy. He also acted in the role of Estragon in a production of *Waiting for Godot*, the absurdist play by Samuel Beckett where two characters wait endlessly for a guest. There is no simple meaning to *Waiting for Godot*, but for the young actors it might have been an exercise of finding meaning in the societal change that they themselves found they needed to engage in, as both their black counterparts made waves and their white elders changed policies.

On May 31, 1964, Meyer graduated from the University of Alabama and began graduate studies in religion and philosophy at Vanderbilt University. The experience as editor of the *Crimson White* and running the editorial, "A Bell Rang," made a long-term mark, opening him to other ideas. He reflected that the experiences of that year pushed him to seek spiritual meaning:

The experience of expanding my interest and empathy continued. The outer identity as a social justice figure quickly gave way to the role of student of Philosophy and Comparative Religion, and from there into absorption in mysticism, the continual longing for the Beloved and the union in the Beloved, and then deeper study and discipleship with a Sufi Master.⁵⁸

Meyer continues to bridge cultures through examination of Eastern and Western philosophy. He expounds on the concepts of expression, relaxation, and universalities. His friend Joe Levin credits the experience of confronting prejudice with leading him to later co-establishing the Southern Poverty Law Center, a non-profit organization that combats hate, intolerance, and discrimination through education and litigation.⁵⁹ The Southern Poverty Law Center identifies and confronts hate groups directly while reaching out to educators with ideas on how to teach tolerance.

For Meyer the fiftieth anniversary of the integration of the University of Alabama does not hold deep significance. He has never returned for a reunion, nor does he maintain ties to his alma

mater. He believes his stand for equal rights is one that can yield significance for students today. In fact, that act in 1962 remains an inspiration for Jewish students at the university. In a 2011 *Crimson White* letter to the editor denouncing a racist event, a Jewish student active in Hillel and Meyer's Zeta Beta Tau fraternity cited Meyer as a precedent for denouncing prejudice.⁶⁰

Meyer's experience as a southern Jew in the heated civil rights era is distinct in that he was a young man with a title and a platform often reserved for older leaders with greater prominence. Most Jews in the South did not make waves because they feared social and economic repercussions from segregationists or they agreed with southern racial mores and practices. But like those Jews who openly supported integration, Meyer acted alone and found support from a small group. He suffered ostracism and was threatened. The experience changed him, but he also made a lasting impact. The year following the publication of the editorial, the University of Alabama administration did not enforce restrictions on the young student journalists at the *Crimson White* as they wrote a first draft of the history, based on fact and opinion, of the monumentally significant year.⁶¹

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"A Bell Rang," editorial, *Crimson White*, September 27, 1962

A Bell Rang . . .

If I had a bell,
 I'd ring it in the morning,
 I'd ring it in the evening,
 All over this land.
 I'd ring out justice,
 I'd ring out freedom,
 I'd ring out love for my brother and my sister,
 All over this land.

. . . . American Folk Song.

A bell rang this week in Oxford, Mississippi.

It tolled not the ending of segregation as some had thought it might. Its message was rather the seeming success of Gov. Ross Barnett, who literally "stood in the schoolhouse door" and denied admission to James Meredith, Mississippi Negro.

We are concerned that Meredith did not gain access to the University of Mississippi. We think he should have been admitted.

Morally, there is no justification for his rejection.

Legally, there can be no doubt he is entitled to become a student at Mississippi.

But this is not our prime concern.

James Meredith's rights have been denied before and will, no doubt, be denied again. This is not to suggest that these denials are justified, for they are not. But it is to suggest that he probably has been forced to rationalize his existence in the society to which he was born.

We are more concerned with the precedent that has been set at Oxford, and the trend that may have been established.

People say that Meredith should not be allowed to attend the University of Mississippi if the majority of the people there and throughout the state do not want him.

This argument has frightening implications in terms of where it might lead. Does freedom of speech mean that the majority is to vote to determine whom they wish to hear? Is freedom of religion to be extended only to those whose beliefs conform to what the majority has decided is orthodox?

More specifically, if the bigot or the demagogue can muster a majority to turn on the Negro, will he necessarily stop there? Or will he next turn to the Catholic, and the Jew, or the member of any other minority group?

People who have studied prejudice attribute much of it to the necessity of the individual to have a tangible scapegoat upon whom to vent his wrath. The Federal Government makes a mistake and it's because the damn Catholics are in control.

And the sheer necessity of having to have someone to look down upon forces the element closest to that of the Negro to oppose the betterment of the Negro's lot.

*A Bell Rang, editorial,
page 4, the Crimson White,
September 27, 1962.
(Courtesy of University of
Alabama Digital Collections,
William Stanley Hoole Special
Collections Library, Tuscaloosa.)*

P. D. East, editor of the **Petal Paper** and author of **The Magnolia Jungle**, puts it this way, "If I were a Catholic in Mississippi, I'd be worried. If I were a Jew, I'd be scared stiff. If I were a Negro, I would already be gone."⁶²

This is our point of prime concern. The basis of the democratic system is equality before the law, and the system is but a mockery if the laws are only to extend to a portion of the citizenry.

Every time the rights of one citizen anywhere are denied, every citizen is harmed.

Every time we trim our legal sail to meet the whirlwinds of the times, the course of the Ship of State is altered, and the destination toward which we have steered for 170 odd years grows more remote.

Bias is a force that strikes at one and all. We have come much too far, and fought far too long, to abandon our democratic system to appease the great god, Expediency.

We lost something American in Oxford this week, and every American citizen is the less for it.

John Donne said: "No man is an island, entire of itself; every man is a piece of the continent, a part of the main; . . . I am involved in mankind; and therefore never send to know for whom the bell tolls; it tolls for thee."

There was no need to send to Oxford this week to see what bell rang. It wasn't the bell of justice and freedom; it rang for you and me.

NOTES

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the staffs at the University of Alabama digital archives, Birmingham Civil Rights Institute, University of Miami Otto Richter library, and the Miami Dade Public Library System.

¹ "A Bell Rang," *Crimson White*, September 27, 1962, 4.

² University of Alabama, *Corolla* (Tuscaloosa, 1963) 50, 51.

³ Dances of Universal Peace International, accessed March 1, 2013, <http://dancesofuniversalpeace.org/home.shtm>; "Dances of Universal Peace & Walking Concentrations," Sufi Ruhaniat International, accessed July 28, 2013, <http://www.ruhaniat.org/index.php/dances-of-universal-peace-and-walking-concentrations>.

⁴ "Murshid Wali Ali Meyer," Sufi Ruhaniat International, accessed March 1, 2013, <http://www.ruhaniat.org/index.php/explore/leaders/2012-06-15-13-40-56/11-murshid-walil-ali-meyer>.

⁵ Melvin Wali Ali Meyer, e-mail to author, January 14, 2013.

⁶ Melvin Wali Ali Meyer, Skype interview conducted by author, March 8, 2012.

⁷ "Timeline," Birmingham Civil Rights Institute, accessed March 1, 2013, <http://rg.bcri.org/gallery/>.

⁸ Eric Etheridge, *Breach of Peace: Portraits of the 1961 Mississippi Freedom Riders* (New York, 2008), 195; Debra L. Schultz, *Going South: Jewish Women and the Civil Rights Movement* (New York, 2001).

⁹ Meyer e-mail to author.

¹⁰ Gary Philip Zola, "What Price Amos? Perry Nussbaum's Career in Jackson, Mississippi," in *The Quiet Voices: Southern Rabbis and Black Civil Rights, 1880s to 1990s*, ed. Mark K. Bauman and Berkley Kalin (Tuscaloosa, 1997), 230–257.

¹¹ Melvin Wali Ali Meyer, Skype interview conducted by author, November 26, 2012.

¹² Marjorie Meyer Goldner, Skype interview conducted by author, November 30, 2012.

¹³ Meyer interview, March 8, 2012.

¹⁴ Henry Black, Skype interview conducted by author, December 4, 2012.

¹⁵ See for example, *Crimson White*, September 20, 1962.

¹⁶ *Ibid.*

¹⁷ Robbie Roberts, an Alabama resident, is retired from an extensive career at the Environmental Protection Agency and the U.S. Air Force.

¹⁸ Robbie Roberts, Skype interview conducted by author, December 2, 2012.

¹⁹ Jordan Cissell, "Alabama's desegregation leaders recall struggles, eventual victories," *Crimson White*, March 4, 2013, accessed July 28, 2013, <http://cw.ua.edu/2013/03/04/cp-throughthedoors/>.

²⁰ P. D. East, East Side column, *Petal Paper*, March 15, 1956, quoted in P. D. East, *The Magnolia Jungle: The Life, Times and Education of a Southern Editor* (New York, 1960), 179.

²¹ "East (P. D.) Collection," The University of Southern Mississippi—McCain Library and Archives, accessed March 1, 2013, <http://www.lib.usm.edu/legacy/archives/m324.htm>.

²² "Integrating Ole Miss: a Civil Rights Milestone: Days of Confrontation," John F. Kennedy Presidential Library and Museum, accessed March 1, 2013, <http://microsites.jfklibrary.org/olemiss/confrontation/>.

²³ "Ole Miss Integration," Civil Rights Digital Library, accessed March 1, 2013, http://crdl.usg.edu/events/ole_miss_integration/.

²⁴ Meyer interview, March 8, 2012.

²⁵ Clive Webb, *Fight Against Fear: Southern Jews and Black Civil Rights* (Athens, GA, 2001), xv.

²⁶ E. Culpepper Clark, *The Schoolhouse Door: Segregation's Last Stand at the University of Alabama* (New York, 1993) 160–162.

²⁷ B. J. Hollars, interview conducted by author, October 23, 2012, on his then forthcoming book: *Opening the Doors: The Desegregation of the University of Alabama and the Fight for Civil Rights in Tuscaloosa* (Tuscaloosa, 2013).

²⁸ *Ibid.*

²⁹ The Meyer family scrapbooks document Melvin's activities at the University of Alabama from 1961 to 1964, the period when he was editor of the school newspaper and when he was censured for writing favorably of James Meredith and integration at the University of Mississippi. The scrapbooks are in the collection named for Melvin's father, Henry Meyer, at Mississippi State University. Meyer family album (1960–1964) photocopy, Henry Meyer Papers, MSS.528, Mitchell Memorial Library Special Collections, Mississippi State University, Starkville, MS (hereafter cited as the Henry Meyer Papers.)

³⁰ Webb, *Fight Against Fear*, xv.

³¹ Bauman and Kalin, eds., *Quiet Voices*.

³² Meyer interview, March 8, 2012.

³³ Joseph Levin, telephone interview conducted by author, October 17, 2012.

³⁴ Meyer interview, March 8, 2012.

³⁵ *Ibid.*

³⁶ Webb, *Fight Against Fear*, 71.

³⁷ *Fiery Cross*, Official Publication of the Knights of the Ku Klux Klan, Tuscaloosa, November 17, 1961.

³⁸ Anonymous letter from "A Nazi," Chicago, addressed to "Hello Jew," November 14, 1962, Henry Meyer Papers.

³⁹ Correspondence from Virginia H. Thorpe to Mrs. Meyer, October 15, 1962, Henry Meyer Papers.

⁴⁰ Larry C. Jackson to Melvin Meyer, December 15, 1962, Henry Meyer Papers.

⁴¹ Meyer interview, March 8, 2012.

⁴² Henry Meyer, a native of Selma, Alabama, was a 1932 journalism and English graduate of the University of Alabama and a Starkville, Mississippi, resident from 1933. He managed Blumenfeld and Fried, a Starkville wholesale grocery business from 1933 to 1946. In 1946, Meyer and his brother Morris purchased the Starkville Publishing Company, a firm that handled job printings and office supplies and published the *Starkville News*, a

weekly newspaper. The Meyers turned the *News* into a daily in 1960 and continued to publish it until 1966. Later, Henry Meyer taught journalism at Mississippi State University where the media center was named for him.

⁴³ Meyer interview, March 8, 2012; Goldner interview.

⁴⁴ Claude Sitton "Alabama Acts to Bar Violence at University," *New York Times*, November 14, 1962.

⁴⁵ Ibid.

⁴⁶ Meyer interview, March 8, 2012.

⁴⁷ Meyer says that hate mail and hateful telephone calls poured into the *Crimson White* and that they published the letters, but a search of the newspaper's digital archives could not confirm this recollection. Ibid.

⁴⁸ "The Ku Klux Klan Legacy of Hate," Anti-Defamation League, accessed March 1, 2013, http://archive.adl.org/issue_combating_hate/uka/default.asp.

⁴⁹ Vice President Jefferson J. Bennett Papers, record group 114, W. S. Hoole Special Collections Library, University of Alabama.

⁵⁰ Ibid.

⁵¹ "Editorial Responsibility," *Crimson White*, October 10, 1962.

⁵² "Melvin Meyer Wins Editorial Award," *Tuscaloosa News*, February 15, 1964.

⁵³ Meyer interview, March 8, 2012.

⁵⁴ Melvin Meyer, "Alabama Crisis," *Journal of the Student Press Association* (Spring 1963), 16, 17.

⁵⁵ Meyer e-mail to author.

⁵⁶ "Brief History of UA: Opening Doors," The University of Alabama, 40th Anniversary Opening Doors, accessed March 1, 2013, http://www.ua.edu/openingdoors/history_openingdoors.html.

⁵⁷ Meyer interview, March 8, 2012.

⁵⁸ Meyer e-mail to author.

⁵⁹ "Who We Are," Southern Poverty Law Center, accessed March 1, 2013, <http://www.splcenter.org/who-we-are>.

⁶⁰ Alex Grodner, "Jewish students support African Americans," *Crimson White*, accessed February 22, 2011, <http://cw.ua.edu/2011/02/22/jewish-students-support-african-americans/>.

⁶¹ Black interview.

⁶² East, East Side column, *Petal Paper*, March 15, 1956.