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Annotated article by Gene Sherman to Los Angeles Times, 30 September 1962

Gene Sherman
To Executive news editor, Los Angeles Times, ER collect.

BY GENE SHERMAN

OXFORD, Miss.--Strolling through Oxford on this particular Sunday afternoon was like having a picnic on a volcano. And it erupted suddenly toward evening.

U. S. marshals moved into Ole Miss in troop carriers and an Army convoy at this moment is on its way toward this once lazy, now beleagured town.

But earlier there was little hint of what is now happening—the occupation of the resistant State University by federal forces.

The lingering solace of summer infused the charming college town with an ante bellum air of leisurely calm, and if you simply looked it was enchanted.

It's when you listen that the illusion changes.

Ole Miss is closed, the arbored campus a couch for students napping on the lawns.

Some in the long shadow of a memorial to the Confederate dead that hoists a stone soldier high on guard over the gateway where James H. Meredith, Negro veteran of a later war, was halted by Mississippi's governor.

Beneath the monument's patina Byron's words give an ironic twist to the snoozing students: "They fell devoted but undying..."

Then a student spoke: "Yeah, they going to register him. Then they going to kill that nigger."

Mississippi is a place of many churches, many of them staunchly colonial, lending unbinding brick reverence to the wooded landscape.

This being Sunday, they resound with the preachments of their ministers and then empty their unpreconceived parishioners who congregated again outside in the balmy weather for social exchanges.

Dressed in Sunday best and the children looked uncomfortably scrubbed. The groups chatting near the churches after the services add another peaceful note.

Then one with the soft-syllable stubbornness of the deep-dyed segregationist: "He ain't going to register. Gov. Barnett'll close the school before he lets that happen or he won't be governor of Mississippi very long."

Later when the seasons of highway patrolmen ceased shrieking the church bells pealed "Ode to Fidelis."
All the elements of a lazy Sunday afternoon are here except one—peace of mind. When they learn you're from Los Angeles, they ask what the people back there think about the situation.

In Oxford they know they are right. But they'd like to think everyone everywhere thinks they're right, too. Perhaps this rises from a far-buried sense of guilt, perhaps from desire for support.

A stranger wouldn't know. He must let the situation speak for itself. He knows only that it speaks with frightening determination.

Rumors are as thick as flies in a hog pen. Very few people here know for sure what is happening or when it will happen. Or how, for that matter.

Local radio stations cut into rock 'n' roll programs (which followed a morning of Christian supplication) to relay the latest bulletins from Jackson, New Orleans and Washington.

News men scurry around checking reports and bemoaning a lack of responsible information. As often happens, those at the front usually know less about what is going on than those at headquarters.

As a guess, there must be 100 or more here, perhaps double that. Every medium is represented from every section of the country. At least two British papers have correspondents at the scene.

A hotel manager said there are about 300 rooms within a radius of 50 miles of Oxford and none is vacant. Correspondents, public officials and law enforcement officers have them all.

The consensus here is that a fourth effort will be made to register the 29-year-old Meredith Monday, a day before Gov. Barnett has been ordered to purge himself of contempt of court charges.

The most intriguing rumor this afternoon is that he would be landed on the campus of 'Ole Miss by helicopter while troops and or U. S. Marshals barricade the entrances.
The Oxford Airfield a couple of miles out of town has a 4800-foot runway, which is capable of accommodating troop-carrying transports. Now, however, troops are moving by airplane and volunteers to seal Mississippi are reported moving in. There is resentment against the Federalization of the National Guard, which Oxford people say was done to remove a hazard rather than to actively implement Meredith's registration. How would a Mississippian service man feel about being ordered to help breach 'Ole Miss's 114-year record of all-white enrollment?

An Air Force corporal hitch-hiking to Jackson put it this way: "I don't know just where my loyalties would be, but I guess I'd rather do that than go to Alcatraz. I don't want no part of it. I know those boys, and they won't take that stuff."

"They better all play it cool or they're going to have another Civil War on their hands."

The stranger from Oxford at Oxford is treated with unfailing courtesy by the local citizens but he need only pause to talk with a Negro at County Courthouse Square in the middle of town to draw some pointedly distasteful looks.

The 19-year-old Negro works on the 'Ole Miss campus as a food processor in the snack shop. The students haven't treated him any different since the Oxford incident began.

"They treat me the same as they did before," he said. How was that? "Good."

He thinks Meredith is a brave man and should be admitted. Does he think they would kill him? Seriously.

"It wouldn't do no good," the youth said, sipping a soft drink. "It would just start all over again with someone else."
Sunday afternoon in Oxford. Peaceful on the surface, roiling underneath, uncertain about tomorrow. The home of 'Ole Miss and of a notions store nearby called The Golden Rule.

Immortalized anonymously by the late William Faulkner and about to be immortalized one way or another in the limelight of world attention.

This is the eve of upheaval, no matter what happens. Coincidentally, omitted for 'Ole Miss it's the eve of homecoming week, but not for one. Endit. Sherman, Thrift Courts, Water Valley 151.

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