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"Through Hazel Eyes" : Hazel Brannon Smith's Fight for Free Speech and Justice in Mississippi 1936-1985

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“Through Hazel Eyes”: Hazel Brannon Smith’s fight for free speech and justice in
Mississippi 1936-1985

By

Jeffery Brian Howell

A Dissertation
Submitted to the Faculty of
Mississippi State University
in Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements
for the Degree of Doctor of Philosophy
in History
in the Department of History

Mississippi State, Mississippi

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2013

“Through Hazel Eyes”: Hazel Brannon Smith’s fight for free speech and justice in
Mississippi 1936-1985

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Hazel Brannon Smith, a prominent white newspaper owner in Mississippi before, during, and after the civil rights era was an avowed supporter of Jim Crow segregation for the first half of her career, until pressure from the white establishment and the changing political and social milieu of the 1950s and 1960s pushed her to become an ally of the black struggle for social justice. Smith's biography reveals how many historians have miscast white liberals of this period. Smith was considered a liberal by her peers, but her actions reveal the firm limits of white liberalism in the rural South during the Civil Rights era. While this dissertation undergirds scholarly research over the last twenty years which viewed the fight for civil rights from a grounds root level, it shows how Smith was unique. She never fully escaped her white paternalistic sentiments, yet she spoke out consistently against racial extremism in Mississippi in the 1960s. Based upon newspaper accounts, personal collections, oral histories and recent scholarly treatments, this work argues that the white response to the civil rights movement in Mississippi was far from uniform.

DEDICATION

I would like to dedicate this work to my parents, Lee Howell and Lucy Howell. Their hard work provided the opportunities that allowed me to pursue my academic career.

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Attaining a PhD has been a long, arduous, maddening, and satisfying experience. I could not have finished this project without the help of many, many people. I want to thank my wife Anita and my son Justin for their patience as I worked to finish this dissertation. A special thanks goes to my committee chairman, Dr. James “Jim” C. Giesen. Jim guided me through this process with patience and humor, even when I wanted to abandon it. I also want to thank my committee, Dr. Anne Marshall, Dr. Michael V. Williams, and Dr. Jason Ward for their comments and encouragement. In 2002, I befriended and studied under Dr. Donald J. Mabry at Mississippi State. He has been one of my best friends ever since. Don’s continual encouragement saw me through some tough times as I struggled through the process of researching and writing this dissertation. I also want to thank my mother, Lucy Howell, and my brothers, Mike and Barry Howell. They continually cheered me on and convinced me I could finish. I want to offer a very special thank you to my friend and colleague, Dr. Andi Knecht. We mutually encouraged each other to finish our dissertations, and now we can call each other Doctor! Finally, I want to say thank you to my colleagues at East Georgia State College, specifically Dr. Thomas Upchurch. I have known “Tommy” since I was six years old, and he has been my friend through thick and thin. I have the privilege of now being his colleague at EGSC. His continual encouragement helped me see that I could finish the project and attain my goal of earning a PhD.

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CHAPTER I

INTRODUCTION

In 1930, a precocious sixteen-year-old Alabamian named Hazel Brannon received her diploma from Gadsden High School in Alabama.¹ A driven young woman, she had worked hard and graduated from high school two years early. In *The Crucible*, the school's yearbook, the editor took three words to describe each of the school's 125 graduates for 1930. Prophetically, the editor described the young Brannon as "industrious, independent," and, "indomitable."²

These qualities would prove vital to the career the young Brannon chose and the period in which she lived. In the 1930s, social custom expected most middle class white women to get married, stay at home, and raise children. Brannon took a different route. She chose the career of journalist, but she did not want to be a mere reporter. To the amazement of her family and friends, she stated that if she was going into journalism, then she had to "write my own newspaper." This young woman wanted to be the boss. What made this declaration even more astounding was the fact that she planned on starting a newspaper in the middle of Great Depression. By the late 1950s, this

¹ Hazel Brannon established a professional journalistic identity in Holmes County, Mississippi in 1936 when she bought the *Durant News*. She married Walter D. Smith when she was thirty-six years old in 1950. For consistency, I refer to her as Brannon Smith or Smith for consistency.

² Hazel Brannon Smith, "Looking at the South Through Hazel Eyes," *Alicia Patterson Fellowship Reporter*, Vol. 6#5, 1983. Accessed 10 January 2012.
http://www.aliciapatterson.org/APF0605/Brannon_Smith/Brannon_Smith.html.

determined woman eventually owned four newspapers in the neighboring state of Mississippi.³

Brannon Smith's willingness to challenge the status quo in Mississippi, a state known for its benighted ways, makes her story important. She gained a national reputation in the decade after World War II for her fight against bootleg liquor, malfeasant officials, and organized crime. In a time when most rural Mississippi newspapers turned a blind eye to such things, Brannon Smith blasted the fetid and lawless atmosphere in her column, "Through Hazel Eyes." Her campaign brought national attention to the region's problems and earned her a reputation as the "fighting lady editor." Brannon Smith's stance for law and order not only brought her fame and popularity, it also provided a lavish lifestyle that included owning convertible Cadillacs, wearing the latest fashions, dating the most eligible bachelors, and taking trips to New York and Europe.⁴

Her story got more complicated when it came to the issue of race. Brannon Smith was brought up within and affirmed Jim Crow etiquette. During the first twenty-five years of her career (1936-1961), she stood as an avowed supporter of segregation and believed it was the best solution for harmony between white and black southerners. Yet, as white southerners employed intimidation and violence to maintain Jim Crow in the decade after the 1954 *Brown* decision, Brannon Smith grew in her dissent. She refused to subvert law and order and free speech in the name of racial integrity. In the late 1950s while facing economic and social backlash, the editor pleaded for white southerners to

³ T. George Harris, "The 11-Year Siege of Mississippi's Lady Editor," *Look* (11 November 1965), 122.

⁴ William Engle, "Fighting Lady Editor," *San Antonio (Texas) Light*, 6 July 1947.

step back from overt and covert lawlessness and find solutions with African Americans. While the pressure grew on her to conform, she steadfastly defended her right to speak her mind. In 1964, she became the first female journalist ever to win the Pulitzer Prize. A 1965 *Look* magazine article described Mississippi as the “homeland of white supremacy” and pointed out that the editor was one of only a handful of brave Mississippi journalists who had the guts to smash “the conspiracy of silence about the rising brutality.” By the end of the 1960s, Brannon Smith held a national reputation as a fearless editor and an ally of the civil rights movement, while many whites in her own county and state reviled her as a traitor and a troublemaker.⁵

This work seeks to answer questions like why did Brannon Smith, a dedicated proponent of segregation, become an ally of the civil rights movement in the 1960s? Also, how did she respond once blacks began to take power in the 1970s? The editor’s career demonstrates that the white response to the emerging African American struggle for justice of the 1950s and 1960s was far from uniform. This dissertation argues that as the racial climate in the Magnolia state changed in the post-World II era, Brannon Smith underwent her own evolution. She changed as the world changed around her, all the while claiming to not have not altered one bit. Yet, her seemingly static professional standards and a propensity for self-reflection meant even her consistencies appeared to be radical change

As she said many times, Brannon Smith did not make the news; she only reported it. She never wavered from her belief as a journalist to print all the news as accurately as possible. Thus, she balked as her peers demanded conformity and silence as they took on

⁵ T. George Harris, *Look*, 122.

an ever-growing belligerence in the defense of Jim Crow. This strategy of resistance not only involved the intimidation of African Americans; it also included putting pressure on moderate whites to keep silent about racial issues or face reprisals. The white backlash against Brannon Smith scandalized her and forced her to reconsider her views. Brannon Smith had to confront the reality that Jim Crow society was antithetical to the basic American ideals of life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness. Thus, over time the editor slowly moved away from the sentiments of most of her white readers and came to see her own fight for civil liberties as a part of the much larger African American struggle for freedom. Over time, she became a collaborator with the civil rights movement.

The full complexity of Brannon Smith's changing ideology was revealed in her Mississippi newspapers. The *Lexington Advertiser* and the *Durant News* were her primary papers, both in Holmes County. The country was a rural area in the center of the state where blacks outnumbered whites three to one. Brannon Smith also owned the *Northside Reporter* in the suburbs of the capital city of Jackson and the *Banner County Outlook* in the small town of Flora. Brannon Smith normally used the same editorials and printed the same *Through Hazel Eyes* column in all four papers. In addition to these editorials, this dissertation looks at other contemporary newspapers, magazine articles, and interviews of Brannon Smith, her friends, and her enemies. The Mississippi state government set up the Mississippi Sovereignty Commission in the late 1950s to investigate and spy on any one the agency considered a threat to the racial status quo. Its files offer a vast array of information concerning the white establishment's views of

moderates like Brannon Smith. Finally, this work interacts with the historical scholarship in order to put Smith's story in a larger context.⁶

Brannon Smith's life stands an important historical subject to consider for several reasons. First, her story fits in with the surge of monographs that have appeared over the last twenty years that deal with civil rights history from the grass roots level. Earlier treatments focused on the well-known leaders or events of the civil rights movement. Historians in the 1990s and on into the first decade of the twenty-first century have argued that the civil rights movement did not merely consist of inspirational leaders Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. or events like the 1963 march on Washington, D.C. Instead, historians in the last two decades have demonstrated that the civil rights movement consisted of millions of people in various contexts undergoing their own personal struggles to attain the franchise and equality.

John Dittmer and Charles Payne published in 1995 the two definitive books on the struggle for African Americans in Mississippi. Dittmer's *Local People: The Struggle for Civil Rights in Mississippi*, and Payne's *I've Got the Light of Freedom: The Organizing Tradition and the Mississippi Freedom Struggle*, both demonstrate that African Americans in Mississippi bravely took the initiative and paid the cost in the attempt to secure freedom and justice in the face of white resistance and oppression. Since their narratives sought to highlight the stories of African Americans on the frontlines of the struggle, they pay only casual attention to the stories of the few sympathetic whites news editors like Smith who contributed. Both Dittmer and Payne

⁶ *Through Hazel Eyes* was Smith's personal column that appeared each issue in the upper left hand side of the front page.

underscored that Holmes County served as a key battleground for civil rights in the 1960s. Brannon Smith worked as an ally for African Americans and voiced their concerns and reported of their struggle. African Americans put their lives and fortunes on the line for civil rights. Brannon Smith's story is important because in her own way, she did the same thing. She was one of the few Mississippi editors that challenged the all-out defense of white supremacy in the state, and in the 1960s, her newspapers served as the major avenue for getting out the story of the civil rights struggle in Holmes County. As one black activist said in 1965, "Can you imagine Lexington without the *Lexington Advertiser*? Or Holmes County without Hazel Brannon Smith? Why, they would put your eyes out."⁷

Charles Eagles pointed out in a 2002 essay that one of the areas that historians have neglected is how local whites responded to the Civil Rights Movement. In his groundbreaking work, Charles Payne included a historiography essay where he denounced any treatment that simply sees all southern whites as one dimensional, stupid, and monolithic in their response to the civil rights movement. In the last decade, a new group of historians have heeded these admonitions and have produced new works that seriously look at white responses to the civil rights movement. A work on Hazel Brannon Smith falls within this area.⁸

⁷ Charles Payne's *I've Got the Light of Freedom: The Organizing Tradition and the Mississippi Freedom Struggle* (Berkeley, CA: Univ. of Calif., 1995); John Dittmer, *Local People: The Struggle for Civil Rights in Mississippi* (Urbana, Ill.: University of Illinois Press, 1995); *Lexington Advertiser*, 25 November 1965.

⁸ Charles Eagles, "The Civil Rights Movement" in John B. Boles, ed., *A Companion to the American South* (Malden, Mass.: Blackwell Publishers, 2002), 469-470; Payne, *I've Got the Light of Freedom*, 418. Several works have come forth in the last five years that point out the white response to civil rights depended on the local context and was not monolithic. David L. Chappell. *A Stone of Hope: Prophetic Religion and the Death of Jim Crow* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2004)

A scholarly biography on Brannon Smith's entire career does not exist. Most major works that look at Civil Rights Movement and white backlash in Mississippi during the 1950s and 1960s make a brief mention concerning Brannon Smith as a moderate and a proponent of free speech. Several scholars have included chapters in books or dissertations, as well as a few journal articles, on Brannon Smith's career. In last decade, John Whalen and Jan Whitt produced two biographies on Brannon Smith. Whalen's book, *Maverick Under the Magnolias: The Hazel Brannon Smith Story*, is the more comprehensive of the two. A reporter and peer of Brannon Smith, Whalen wrote a well-researched biography for the general public but included no footnotes and engaged

looks at why white southerners were ineffectual to stop the civil rights movement. Chappell concludes that white segregationists could not rely on their religious beliefs to sustain the fight against the civil rights movement unlike many black leaders who used their religion to propel them forward for civil rights; See also Kevin Kruse, *White Flight: Atlanta and the Making of Modern Conservatism* (Trenton, NJ: Princeton, 2005); Matthew D. Lassiter's, *The Silent Majority: Suburban Politics in the Sunbelt South* (2006); Joseph Crespino's *In Search of Another Country: Mississippi and the Conservative Counterrevolution* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2007) looks at white response in Mississippi to the emergence of the civil rights movement. Kruse, Lassiter and Crespino all point out that whites eventually tied their struggle to maintain power by changing tactics, using colorblind rhetoric, and tying their aims to a growing conservative shift in the 1960s. Jason Sokol, *There Goes My Everything: White Southerners in the Age of Civil Rights 1945-1975* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 2006), explores the responses of various responses whites had to the civil rights movement from that of epiphany and change to staunch resistance. Surprisingly, Brannon Smith is not mentioned in the work; George Lewis, *Massive Resistance: The White Response to the Civil Rights Movement*. New York and London: [Oxford University Press](#), 2006 and Clive Webb, *Rabble Rousers: The American Far Right in the Civil Rights Era* (Athens, Ga.: University of Georgia Press, 2010) details the white response from outright violence and subversion of law to making the issue a matter of personal rights; Jason Morgan Ward, *Democracy: The Making of a Segregationist Movement and the Remaking of Racial Politics, 1936-1965* (Chapel Hill, NC: UNC Press, 2011), argues that white southerners mobilized for resistance to civil rights long before the 1954 *Brown* decision. This resistance developed strategies dating back to the New Deal era of Franklin Delano Roosevelt; Anders Walker, *The Ghost of Jim Crow: How Southern Moderates Used Brown v. Board of Education to Stall Civil Rights* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2009), focuses on "moderate" southern governors like Mississippi's J.P. Coleman, and how these men did not want to make the mistake of openly defying the federal government and provoking violence, but instead used a variety of strategies to maintain segregation as strenuously as those who promoted open violence. Kimberly K. Little, *You Must Be from the North: Southern White Women in the Memphis Civil Rights Movement* (Jackson: University Press of Mississippi, 2009), takes a different perspective and addresses a group of southern white women who sought to aid the black freedom struggle in Memphis; Kevin M. Kruse, Stephen Tuck, *Fog of War: The Second World War and the Civil Rights Movement* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2012), includes several essays by a number of scholars who reevaluate the commonly held conception that World War II was the turning point for the civil rights movement.

with only a smattering of the scholarly literature. Whitt, a professor of Journalism and Mass Communications at the University of Colorado Boulder, produced a brief biography entitled *Burning Crosses and Activist Journalism: Hazel Brannon Smith and the Mississippi Civil Rights Movement* in 2005. Whitt's conclusions are mostly built on already published material. In 2010, Wendy Reed completed her doctoral dissertation, *Hazel Brannon Smith: A Portrait of the Journalist as a Young Woman*. However, the work did not span Brannon Smith's entire career, but instead examined the seminal influences on young Hazel Brannon while she attended the University of Alabama in the early 1930s. Also, the scholarship that does exist concerning Hazel Brannon Smith has failed to highlight enough the link between her fight against the White Citizens' Council in the 1950s and early 1960s with her crusade against bootleggers and corrupt officials in the late 1940s and the early 1950s. As such, her so-called "liberalism" seems to come out of nowhere. The resulting impression is that this single white person resisted Jim Crow, so why could not everyone else? This dissertation places Brannon Smith's transformation in a context that helps us not only understand the development of white liberals, but also of the limits of their resistance.⁹

⁹ George Robert and Hank Klibanoff, *The Race Beat: The Press, The Civil Rights Struggle, and The Awakening of a Nation* (New York: Random House, 2007) argue that a few Mississippi editors like Smith gave a counter-narrative against the uniformity of most white newspapers concerning white supremacy and segregation; Joseph Crespi, *In Search of Another Country: Mississippi and the Conservative Counterrevolution* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton Univ. Press, 2007), 34, points out that Smith was one of the few Mississippi editors who balked at the extremist tactics of the white establishment while arguing simultaneously for the maintenance of Jim Crow; Susan Weill, "Hazel versus Hacksaw: Freedom Summer Coverage by the Women of the Mississippi Press," *Journalism Studies* (Volume 2, Number 4, 2000) 545-561 argues that Smith was the only female journalist, and only one of a handful of editors in total, that wrote favorably about civil rights workers in Mississippi in the 1964 Freedom Summer effort. This was an effort to register black Mississippians for the vote. Mark Newman, "Hazel Brannon Smith and Holmes County, Mississippi, 1936-1964: The Making of a Pulitzer Prize Winner," *Journal of Mississippi History* 54 (February 1992), 59-87, argues that Smith's experiences under white backlash caused her to undergo a transformation from segregationist to ally of the Civil Rights Movement; Arthur J. Kaul, "Hazel

An interpretation of Brannon Smith's career is important not only because she covered Mississippi in the turbulent fifties and sixties, but also because she covered the emergence of black leadership in the state and particularly in Holmes County into the 1980s. The civil rights movement did not stop in the 1960s. As Melissa Fay Green demonstrated in her work *Praying for Sheetrock: A Work of Non-Fiction*, African Americans in the 1970s coastal McIntosh County, Georgia battled against corrupt officials to gain civil rights and equality. Likewise, African Americans in Holmes County gained the franchise in the mid-1960s, but still had to overcome barriers concerning issues like civil rights, education, and economic concerns well into the 1980s. Sylvia Reedy Gist detailed the educational battles African Americans in Holmes County waged in the 1970s and 1980s in her work, *Educating a Rural Southern Community: The Case of Blacks in Holmes County, Mississippi 1870 to the Present*. Brannon Smith struggled as well to find her place in the new political and social landscape. Her fights in the 1950s and 1960s put her deep in debt. She had to deal with lingering white resentment but also a new dynamic with African Americans who made it clear they had their own ideas and agendas.¹⁰

Brannon Smith and the *Lexington Advertiser*" in David R. Davies, ed., *The Press and Race: Mississippi Journalists Confront the Movement* (Jackson, Ms.: University Press of Mississippi, 2001), 233-262, counters and argues that she came out of the progressive muckraker's tradition and never advocated integration and thus should not be called a civil rights activist; Matthew Bosisio, "Hazel Brannon Smith: Pursuing Truth at Her Peril." *American Journalism*, 18(4) 69-83 does not address the issue of whether or not Smith was a civil rights activist. Instead he focuses on her willingness to speak freely at a high cost; John Whalen, *Maverick Under the Magnolias: The Hazel Brannon Smith Story* (USA: Xlibris, 2000); Jan Whitt, *Burning Crosses and Activist Journalism: Hazel Brannon Smith and the Mississippi Civil Rights Movement* (USA: University Press of America, 2005); Wendy M. Reed, *Hazel Brannon Smith: A Portrait of the Journalist as a Young Woman*. PhD Dissertation, University of Alabama, 2010.

¹⁰ Melissa Fay Greene, *Praying For Sheetrock: A Work of Non-fiction* (New York: Ballantine, 1992); Sylvia Reedy Gist, *Educating a Rural Southern Community: Blacks in Holmes County, Mississippi 1870 to the Present* (Pelham, AL: Productivity Unlimited Publishers, 1995).

Ultimately, Brannon Smith's story demonstrates the un-American nature of Jim Crow. This system violated every democratic concept on which this country is founded. Jim Crow could not tolerate criticism. Jim Crow could not tolerate introspection and compromise. Jim Crow could not tolerate dissent. It was not a system that allowed for "and" as in whites *and* blacks on any level of equality. It only tolerated "either/or," as in you unquestioningly favored white supremacy *or* you became an enemy of the white establishment. In her struggles as a journalist, Brannon Smith came to see that.

Including this introduction, this work consists of nine sections. The second chapter looks at Brannon Smith's background, the influences that shaped her desire to become a journalist, and her editorial attack on bootleg liquor in Holmes County (1914-1953). The editor came to believe that illegal booze fostered an atmosphere of lawlessness and corruption, and she needed to take it head on for the benefit of the community. Chapter three looks at Brannon Smith's support of Jim Crow etiquette in her first two decades as a journalist (1936-1953). In her mind, maintaining racial integrity from inside and outside forces was key to maintaining southern society. The fourth chapter (1954-1955) looks at how the themes of law and order and racial integrity converged in 1954 when Brannon Smith attacked the sheriff of Holmes County for malfeasance and brutality against blacks. This was the beginning of Brannon Smith's finding herself outside the mainstream. Chapter five (1956-1958) details the white establishment's pressure against the editor which resulted in the formation of a rival paper, the *Holmes County Herald*. Chapter six (1959-1961) chronicles Brannon Smith's open war with the white establishment at the county and state level and her transformation concerning segregation. The seventh chapter (1962-1967), looks at

Brannon Smith's open alliance with local and state civil rights activists. Chapter eight (1967-1982) examines how Smith dealt with the growing black leadership in the post-civil rights era. It is during this period that Brannon Smith found herself and her career in an almost no man's land. Many of her old enemies still reviled her, and she could not get in sync with African American leaders who demanded to voice their own opinions and go their own path. Chapter nine, the epilogue, looks at Brannon Smith's decline and her importance as a journalistic voice in Mississippi.

The bare facts point out that Hazel Brannon Smith was an owner and editor of a several small rural newspapers in Mississippi for over almost fifty years (1936-1985). Yet, the bare facts do not come close to telling her story. Brannon Smith's willingness to stand for democracy, law and order, decency, and freedom of speech left a lasting imprint on the landscape of Mississippi and made her an icon in the journalistic profession.

CHAPTER II

"I AIN'T NO LADY, I'M A NEWSPAPER WOMAN": THE BATTLE WITH BOOTLEGGING AND ORGANIZED CRIME

In a newspaper career that accomplished many firsts, it was only fitting that Hazel Freeman Brannon was the firstborn child of D.B. and Georgia Brannon. Hazel Brannon came into the world on February 3, 1914 in Alabama City, a tiny town tucked into the northeast corner of the state that gave its name. The Brannons later gave young Hazel four other siblings: Margaret Eleanor (1915), D.B. Brannon, Jr., (1916), Mack Engle Brannon (1917), and Bonnie Parthenia (1923). While Georgia Brannon stayed home to take care of the children, Dock Brannon worked as a wire instructor at the Republic Steel Mill in Alabama City. He also moonlighted as a self-employed electrical contractor, doing private wiring jobs for small houses and businesses.¹

The Brannon's, like many people in the rural South, considered religious inculcation vital to a child's proper upbringing. Thus, they regularly attended the nearby Dwight Baptist Church. Georgia Brannon taught Sunday School, an experience that would leave its mark on Hazel Brannon's career as a journalist. In almost fifty years of

¹ The larger city of Gadsden would later annex the smaller enclave; Hazel Brannon married Walter Smith in 1951 and used the professional moniker Hazel Brannon Smith for the rest of her career. For clarity, she will be referred to by her maiden name until this monograph reaches 1951 in chronology. Gadsden is located in the foothills of the Smokey Mountains; George Harris, "The 11 Year Siege of Mississippi's Lady Editor," *Look*, 16 November 1965, 122; John Whalen, *Maverick Under the Magnolias: The Hazel Brannon Smith Story* (USA: Xlibris, 2000), 19-20; Damon Runyon, "The Brighter Side," *Indiana* (Pennsylvania) *Evening Gazette*, 28 July 1940.

columns (1936-1984), the Brannon's eldest daughter returned again and again to the Bible sprinkling her writings with biblical references that called people to aspire to morality, a common brotherhood, and peace.²

Even though Brannon grew up with people who valued the American tradition of political independence and who espoused the biblical concept of universal brotherhood, she also lived in a world where a significant portion of its citizens were denied the basic freedoms of life and treated as less than equal. Born less than twenty years after *Plessy v. Ferguson*, the 1896 U.S. Supreme Court case that declared segregation legal and established Jim Crow as law, Brannon did not escape the racial prejudices of her peers. Though personal relationships between southern whites and blacks could be fluid, everyone knew there were myriad taboos that neither group dared to violate. Neil McMillen defined this existence in his study, *Dark Journey: Black Mississippians in the Age of Jim Crow*. He pointed out, “wherever the two races came together, the forces of social habit and white opinion were in themselves usually sufficient to ensure that the races knew their places and occupied them with neither a statute nor a white or ‘colored’ sign to direct the way.”³

As an adult, Hazel Brannon recounted her formative years as almost idyllic in regards to race. Georgia Brannon belonged to the Missions group of the Dwight Baptist Church, and many times Hazel would accompany her mother on trips to local black Baptist churches where Georgia Brannon would read Bible stories to the young congregants. Brannon later said that her parents taught her to treat everyone with respect.

² T. George Harris, *Look*, 16 November 1965

³ Neil R. McMillen, *Dark Journey: Black Mississippians in the Age of Jim Crow* (Urbana, Ill.: University of Illinois Press), 10.

Biographer John Whalen tells a story of Brannon's past where supposedly she and her siblings were playing in their yard with some of the neighborhood kids, one of whom was biracial. A neighborhood playmate referred to this individual as "a flop eared dog." According to Brannon, her mother called in the children and told them to inform their playmates that none of them would be allowed back in the Brannon yard if they ever used language like that. Many white southerners like Brannon commonly told stories like this about their lives as children. Supposedly, some semblance of racial equality existed between them and their black playmates, but the color line became fixed once these children reached puberty.⁴

Like most southern white middle-class white women growing up at this time, Brannon recalled of having a fond relationship with the family's black maid, a woman name Lulu. Brannon wrote in the 1960s that Lulu was considered part of the family and ran the home when Brannon's parents were absent. Also, Brannon noted that not only did her mother have cordial relations with African Americans, but so did her father Dock Brannon. According to Brannon, her father gave credit to black customers and allowed blacks to come to the front door of their home on business. These kinds of stories are common among white southerners, of course, in part because it eased the guilt that came during the Civil Rights Movement, when black southerners protested these very same working and living conditions. These stories also arose because in spite of Jim Crow, blacks and whites often did live lives intimately connected within this oppressive, hierarchical world.⁵

⁴ John Whalen, *Maverick Under the Magnolias*, 22-23.

⁵ T. George Harris, *Look*, 126.

Most of these recollections came from Brannon after she had gained national attention for editorials excoriating racial extremism, but it does seem prudent to take them as an attempt to embellish her past. Whatever benevolence her parents displayed toward black residents of Gadsden and Alabama City, they did not challenge the basic nature of their world. African Americans faced a reality of oppression, intimidation, and inequality in Alabama and the South first six decades of the twentieth century. Only in adulthood, would Hazel Brannon be forced to address the inequalities of her world.⁶

One of the reasons Brannon even broached the taboo subject of race relations as an adult stemmed from her pluck and willingness to push the envelope in whatever situation she found herself in. She demonstrated this trait in high school. Described by everyone who knew her as precocious, Brannon earned her diploma from Gadsden High School in 1930, at the age of sixteen. Her high school annual, *The Crucible*, described her as “industrious, independent, indomitable.” Her parents thought she was too young to attend college, so Brannon found an avenue for her drive in another venue, the newspaper business.⁷

The sixteen-year-old got a job at the weekly *Etowah Observer* in Alabama City. She excelled in this fast-paced, constantly-changing position. The paper paid her one dollar for every personal story and societal piece that she submitted. She quickly moved up to writing front-page articles. Vivacious and outgoing, she took on the job of selling advertising and made a 10% commission. She proved so proficient that her commissions

⁶ John Whalen, *Maverick Under the Magnolias*, 21-23.

⁷ Hazel Brannon Smith, “Looking at the South Through Hazel Eyes,” *Alicia Patterson Fellowship Reporter*, Vol. 6#5, 1983, Accessed 10 January 2012, http://www.aliciapatterson.org/APF0605/Brannon_Smith/Brannon_Smith.html.

were costing the paper a lot of money. The paper solved the problem by putting the young woman on salary. The teenager so earned the trust of the newspaper owners that they gave her the job of keeping the paper's books. She also edited the Society section of the paper. Brannon clearly had talent. She excelled at the entire range of tasks involved in running a newspaper, and even at that young age, she seemed to understand her place. Her cousin - Max Brannon - recollected that young Hazel got "the ink on her hands that wouldn't come off."⁸

This taste of the newspaper business prompted young Hazel Brannon to set a precedent in her family. She became the first Brannon or Freeman to attend college. This defied the tradition of the women in her family, the expectation of staying home and helping with the domestic issues, and ultimately by becoming a wife and mother. Instead, Brannon wanted a career as a journalist. She chose the University of Alabama and enrolled in the fall of 1932. The five foot nine dark haired woman who friends described as "a beauty" reveled in the university setting. She immersed herself in almost every aspect of college life. She joined the Delta Zeta Tau Sorority and was elected its beauty queen. She eventually served as the editor for the campus paper, the *Crimson and White*. Brannon sang first soprano in the Glee Club. Her days were also filled with activities in the Young Women's Christian Association (YWCA) and the Women's Athletic Association.⁹

⁸ T. George Harris, *Look*, 122; Wendy M. Reed, *Hazel Brannon Smith: A Portrait of the Journalist as a Young Woman*, PhD Dissertation, University of Alabama, 2010, 66; the Max Brannon quote can be found on page 45.

⁹ John Whalen, *Maverick Under The Magnolias*, 25.

From her first months on campus, Brannon impressed her contemporaries with her brains and ability. In its October 27, 1934 edition, The *Brownsville (Texas) Herald's* Society page contained a large photograph of the young Brannon under the caption “Beauty Judges Beauty.” The brief article underneath the picture noted that that the beauty queen’s intelligence and journalistic ability had won her the editorial post on the *Crimson and White*. With tongue in cheek, the piece quipped that the editor “decides what beauties shall grace its pages.”¹⁰

Brannon’s years at the University of Alabama (1932-1935) left a profound mark on her personal and professional life. In 1932, the United States struggled under the weight of the Great Depression. University President George Denny wanted to model the university and its programs to answer the new challenges facing the country. He wanted graduates to go forth in the social Progressive vein. He maintained that one’s career was to be about service to others and the improvement of society. Denny argued that all Alabama graduates were expected to train themselves for “efficiency and character and service.”¹¹

A part of this plan included the expansion of the academic discipline of journalism. The first journalism course had been taught in 1925, under the English department, and the school created a Department of Journalism by the next year. In 1930, Alabama created the major of Journalism for the purpose of training young men and women to not only report the news, but to make a lasting contribution to society.

¹⁰ *Brownsville (Texas) Herald*, “Beauty Judges Beauty,” 27 October 1934, 11

¹¹ Brannon only went to Alabama for three years. She took Summer classes and finished a year early; George Denny quote in Wendy Reed, *Hazel Brannon Smith: A Portrait of the Journalist as a Young Woman*, 92.

The *Crimson and White* stated that the modern journalist should not merely print “the non-interpretive transcript of the minutia of the run of the mill news” but also be a journalist “capable of coping with perplexing problems of national and international economy.” In 1932, Brannon entered the third class under this new journalism department.¹²

Brannon’s training came under the tutelage of Professor Clarence Cason, the head of the Journalism Department and one of the two teaching faculty. Cason spent much of his career as a journalist and essayist before taking the position at Alabama in 1928. For years, he reflected on the conditions he saw in the Deep South, and recorded his conclusions in a book, *90 Degrees in the Shade*. In this provocative work, Cason gently takes the Deep South to task for its willingness to elect demagogues who only took advantage of the people instead of working to improve the region. Cason also chastised the white South for its tendency to ignore present problems by wallowing in a glorified highly fictitious past. He wrote,

On the whole, the future of the South cannot be served by that state of mind which holds that any critical examination of our past must be regarded as sacrilege. True loyalty to the South demands that we boldly grapple with the fact that our historical stereotypes have now and then been smirched with elements of cruelty and sham.¹³

¹² *Crimson and White*, 14 April 1932, quoted in Wendy Reed, *Hazel Brannon Smith: A Portrait of the Journalist as a Young Woman*, 116; Information on the evolution of the Journalism Department at the Univ. of Alabama in University of Alabama, Department of Journalism (history), Accessed 8 August 2008, <http://www.jn.ua.edu/about/history.html>;

¹³ Clarence Cason, *90 Degrees in the Shade* (Tuscaloosa, Al.: Univ. of Alabama Press, 1935, 1983), 53; See also Phillip Beidler, "Yankee Interloper and Native Son: Carl Carmer and Clarence Cason, Unlikely Twins of Alabama Exposé." *Southern Cultures* 9 (March 2003): 18-35; John M. Mathews, "Clarence Cason Among the Southern Liberals." *Alabama Review* 38 (January 1985): 3-18; H. Bailey Thomson, "Clarence Cason: Journalist in Academe." *Alabama Review* 53 (July 2000): 177-98, and "Clarence Cason's Shade: A Look at Alabama Then and Now." *Alabama Heritage* 60 (Spring 2001): 20-27.

Cason went even further and offered his opinions on the treatment of African Americans. Cason surmised that the idea that black southerners had to be kept in a place of subjection was a holdover from the days of slavery as well as current competition for jobs between white and black workers. He said this attitude was a “formidable barrier in the way of an intelligent solution of the racial difficulties in the South. Not only that, it also at times threatens to vitiate the popular sense of justice and the dignity of the law below the Potomac.” This attitude made no sense in the realities of white-black relations. He asked if the prevailing thought that African Americans had to be kept in their “place” was a myth that was forgotten regularly only to be reinstated at times with horrifying violence. Cason noted that black and white southerners rubbed shoulders as they shopped in stores on Saturday afternoons. He once viewed whites and blacks of all classes and distinctions riding and screaming with delight in a ride at a county fair and wondered how this was unacceptable at other times. Concerning the vagaries and inconsistencies of segregation, he concluded,

Be that as it may, there is no logical explanation for a southern woman’s refusal to ride on street cars unless they have separate seats reserved for Negro passengers, while she has her child at home to be cared for and influenced during its formative years by a Negro housemaid.¹⁴

In the context of the 1930s, many white southerners who read Cason’s book considered his mild criticisms scandalous and dangerous. The pressure that he knew would come from the publishing of such a book proved too great for Cason to handle. He

¹⁴ Clarence Cason, *90 Degrees in the Shade*, 108-110.

committed suicide just weeks before the book was published in 1935, during Brannon's last semester at the University of Alabama.¹⁵

Despite his death, Cason's teaching and book made a lasting imprint on the young Brannon. She recalled how Cason used to lecture her class and challenge them to stay in the South and make a difference. According to Brannon, Cason reminded them they could go anywhere to make money, but he pleaded with them to "not leave the South in the lurch." Instead, he urged them to remain in the region to serve the people and "have part in the growth and development of one of the greatest underdeveloped regions in America." Brannon followed Cason's charge. She had the intelligence and drive to make it anywhere in the country, but chose to remain in the rural South to serve the community through journalism.¹⁶

Though the country languished under the Great Depression in 1935, Hazel Brannon knew what she wanted and would not stop until she got it. She said to her peers, "I want to give dictation, not take it." She did not want to be a secretary or work for someone else. Instead, she wanted to own her own newspaper. During the summer of 1935, Brannon began to investigate notices of newspapers for sale in the Publisher's Auxiliary.¹⁷

This search took her west to Mississippi. Brannon heard from a lawyer friend that a Mississippi weekly, *The Durant News*, was up for sale. She and a boyfriend drove over to take a look. Durant, as a part of Holmes County, was located almost in the center of

¹⁵ Wendy Reed, *Hazel Brannon Smith: A Portrait of the Journalist as a Young Woman*, 103.

¹⁶ T. George Harris, *Look*, 19 November 1965.

¹⁷ Hazel Brannon Smith, *Looking at the Old South Through Hazel Eyes: Part 1, An American Community Newspaper Under Pressure 1983*, Alicia Patterson Fellowship, Accessed 10 January 2012, <http://aliciapatterson.org/stories/looking-old-south-through-hazel-eyes>.

the state on Highway 51. At that time, this road served as the main North-South thoroughfare that bisected the state, connecting such cities as New Orleans, Memphis, St. Louis, and Chicago. Durant was also on the main railroad line of the Illinois Central Railroad. In 1935, Durant had a population of 2,500 people. Located on the eastern edge of the county, it was just across the Big Black River from Attala County. Durant and the county seat of Lexington were located in hilly terrain while the western third of the county lies within the Mississippi Delta. In 1935, the county held 39,000 inhabitants, 27,000 of which were African American.¹⁸

Newspapers, like the rest of the country, staggered under the weight of the Depression in 1935. In addition, men dominated the newspaper industry. Smith was undaunted by these obstacles. She ignored her parents' and friends' advice. The twenty-one-year old decided to buy *The Durant News* and revive it. Called the "Durant Excuse" by the local townsfolk, the paper limped along with a subscription rate of 600 readers and usually ended up in the trash on the Thursday afternoon it came out. Three editors had come and gone in the previous eighteen months before Brannon's arrival. A tall, vivacious force of nature, Brannon waltzed into the bank in Durant and procured a \$3,000 loan to buy the paper. She told syndicated columnist Damon Runyon in 1940 that a close friend gave her six weeks before the venture would fail. Years later Brannon recalled that "the boys in the pool room were taking bets on how long I'd last and the most they

¹⁸ The ancient Greeks named the triangular, flat flood plain along the Nile River in Egypt, "delta," after their alphabetical letter Δ (Delta). The name now refers to a river's flat alluvial flood plain. The Mississippi Delta lies, west to east, between the Mississippi and Yazoo Rivers. North to South, the delta stretches from Memphis, Tennessee to Vicksburg, Mississippi. Along the eastern boundary rises a line of fertile bluffs, some reaching two hundred feet in height. The Delta is two hundred miles long and seventy miles wide at its furthest point. See James C. Cobb, *The Most Southern Place on Earth: The Mississippi Delta and the Roots of Regional Identity* (New York: Oxford Press, 1992), 4.

gave me was six months.” Yet, as a teenage girl, she had turned a small job at her hometown paper into a lucrative profession. She had thrived in college, and she believed she had the smarts and the drive to make the paper work. By August of 1936, Brannon was the new owner of the *Durant News*.¹⁹

Soon after taking over the paper, she met Billy Snyder, the Lieutenant Governor of Mississippi and a veteran journalist. Brannon later recalled that Snyder commented at their initial meeting, “Young lady, Durant has long been known as the graveyard of Mississippi journalism. If you can make a go of this newspaper, you can have anything you want in Mississippi journalism, or anywhere for that matter.” At the 1936 Mississippi Press Association meeting, Brannon met with Hodding and Betty Carter, the owners and editors of the Greenville *Delta Star* which they eventually renamed the *Delta-Democrat Times*. Hodding Carter admitted that upon meeting Brannon, he doubted the young female editor’s “dream of making something out of what was then nothing.” She proved him wrong. Impressed with her skills, Carter was also struck with her beauty. In a 1937 column Carter called Brannon “the prettiest editress in the state.”²⁰

From these comments, it’s obvious that many people first noticed Smith’s physical attractiveness, and she used this to disarm them. A banker gave a young woman with no real credit history a \$3,000 loan in the middle of the Great Depression. Her journalistic peers were wowed by her looks. While appreciative of her physical appearance, many of her crusty newspaper peers admitted this made them doubt her

¹⁹ T. George Harris, *Look*, 122; Damon Runyon, “The Brighter Side,” *Indiana* (Pennsylvania) *Evening Gazette*, 28 July 1940; “Through Hazel Eyes,” *Lexington Advertiser*, 4 August 1966, 122.

²⁰ *Lexington Advertiser*, 4 August 1966; Hodding Carter, Jr., *First Person Rural* (Garden City, New York: Doubleday, 1963), 218.

ability. Smith used her good looks to pry open the door of opportunity, but then she demonstrated her intelligence and drive to open further avenues.

Citizens of Durant did not know what to make of this young dynamo full of “bloom and ambition.” Brannon took up residence in the four story tall Durant Hotel, one block west of the railroad station. She determined to revive the paper by providing good service and covering any and all events of significance in the county. Many travelers who got off the train at Durant for a brief respite encountered the young vivacious editor who queried them for any interesting bit of news. News of weddings, church revivals, birthdays, chamber of commerce meetings, and any other social event soon appeared in the pages of the *News*. Brannon traveled throughout the east side of the county attempting to sell advertising in the paper. One friend quipped that the young editor “could sell ice to an Eskimo.” Within a very short time, Brannon turned the paper into an asset for the community and citizens of Durant had a legitimate “excuse” to purchase and read the newspaper.²¹

Following Clarence Cason’s advice, Brannon determined her paper would devote itself to community service. This meant that she would promote anything that she thought would benefit the town and county and attack anything that she (or the community at large) deemed detrimental. Friend and colleague Hodding Carter described this concept as “editor as citizen.” He wrote,

The editor can contribute more to the community’s well being if he thinks of himself first as a citizen of his town, who by good fortune happens to be a newspaper editor in that town, rather than a newspaper editor who

²¹ John Whalen, *Maverick Under the Magnolias*, 34.

happens to be a citizen, permanently or in passing, of some particular town.²²

Brannon's dedication to call a spade a spade would bring her accolades as well as make her highly controversial.

Brannon spiced up the paper with a personal column that gave her an avenue to speak on current issues. She labeled her first attempt "Knock Knock." In it she attempted to boost the town's business as well as speak on matters needful to the community. By the summer of 1937, however, she changed the column's title to "Through Hazel Eyes," a play on her name. The column, with her picture, adorned the upper left hand side for years to come.²³

The column soon became a must-read for Durant and county residents because of Brannon's unflagging willingness to take on any issue that she thought vital to the community. Though she immersed herself in the community and desired to hold a prominent position, this did not stop her from speaking her mind. She addressed issues that pleased and displeased her readers. In June 1937, Brannon wrote a piece glamorizing the character and longsuffering of Jefferson Davis, the president of the Confederacy. In December 1938, she urged the citizens of Durant to vote for a bond issue that would bring a hosiery mill and jobs to Durant.²⁴

While these kinds of articles did not result in raised eyebrows, Brannon caused a minor scandal when she wrote an article in 1937 on the rising epidemic of venereal disease in Holmes County. In an editorial entitled "Venereal Disease Problem," she

²² Hodding Carter, Jr., *First Person Rural*, 244-245.

²³ John Whalen, *Maverick Under the Magnolias*, 34-35.

²⁴ *Ibid.*, 36.

praised a local group for its work to decrease the problem. Brannon argued that the epidemic was too serious to keep quiet about. It was a community problem, and thus it needed to be brought out in the open and addressed. At this time, Brannon was dating a young man from a prominent Lexington family. According to Brannon, the young man chastised her for the editorial and told her that young ladies did not talk in public about such issues as sexually transmitted diseases. The young editor fired back “I ain’t no lady, I’m a newspaper woman.” Whether apocryphal or true, it set the tone for the characteristics that came to define her career. She tackled issues that made her readers (prominent or not) uncomfortable and many times angry, but she believed firmly in the idea that a community could only thrive if there was a free flow of information. Only then could a community’s citizens make informed decisions.²⁵

Despite the controversial VD article, Brannon thrived in Durant and Holmes County in the late 1930s and on into decade of the 1940s. The readership of the *Durant News* grew to over 1400, and she became a popular though provocative socialite in the county. Reflecting on those early years, Brannon told a reporter in the 1980s, “Honey I had the most eligible bachelor in Durant and the most eligible bachelor in Lexington, and my only trouble was that I couldn’t have them both. That’s true. I was something.” The young editor became thoroughly entrenched in the everyday affairs of Holmes County. She was so successful that she paid off her \$3,000 loan before the end of the decade. By the early 1940s, Brannon’s financial success became obvious by the kind of lifestyle she lived. Bill Minor, the Mississippi beat reporter for the New Orleans *Times Picayune* and

²⁵ T. George Harris, *Look*, 122; John Whalen, *Maverick Under the Magnolias*, 36.

Brannon's close friend, recalled that in her heyday Brannon's "tastes ran to white Cadillac convertibles, world cruises, and big floppy hats."²⁶

Brannon's fortunes continued to improve as she expanded her newspaper holdings. The success of the *Durant News* whetted her appetite for expansion. In 1940, she told columnist Damon Runyon in 1940 that she was looking for another newspaper to buy, and she got that opportunity in 1943 with the county's largest paper, the *Lexington Advertiser*.²⁷

The *Lexington Advertiser* was Holmes County's oldest and largest paper. Founded in 1838, the paper operated for 105 years before Brannon bought it. Having been in the county only seven years, the twenty-nine-year-old editor not only defied the expectations of her peers, she far surpassed them. With the ownership of the county's largest newspapers, her social and financial status further blossomed. Yet, the young editor's social and journalistic obligations reached just as deep as her pocketbook. Like her mentor, Clarence Cason, and her contemporary Hodding Carter, she believed her role as a local journalist revolved around the idea of promoting that which best benefited the community.²⁸

All three journalists had their careers influenced by the muckraking tradition of the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. Muckrakers were journalists who believed that journalism was a calling with proper codes of conduct. They believed they

²⁶ Lee Freeland, "Time Closes Lexington Newspaper that Battled Racism," *Clarion Ledger/Jackson Daily News*, 5 January 1986; Bill Minor, "TV Movie Cheats Heroic Journalist" *Jackson Clarion Ledger*, 24 April 1994.

²⁷ Damon Runyon, "The Brighter Side," *Indiana (Pennsylvania) Evening Gazette*, 28 July 1940; Brannon bought the *Lexington Advertiser* from W.C. Mabry, Jr. Mabry, a member of the U.S. Naval reserve, sold the paper because he was called to active service during World War II and had no qualified person to run the paper in his absence; see John Whalen, *Maverick Under the Magnolias*, 49.

²⁸ Hodding Carter, *First Person Rural*, 244.

possessed a moral and civic obligation to report the truth in order for the public to be informed. Muckrakers assumed that once the public had received all the facts, then they would make decisions that would lead to a more just society. Brannon believed in this idea and tried to implement this principle in her own newspapers. This dedication brought her acclaim as well as notoriety.²⁹

It was all warmth and good cheer when Hazel Brannon published her first edition of the *Lexington Advertiser* in April of 1943. Local merchants and the town's leadership paid for a banner at the top of the first issue that said "Lexington welcomes Miss Hazel Brannon." For Brannon, this was another master stroke of self-promotion. She gushed gratitude in her "Through Hazel Eyes" column. She wrote, "Mere words cannot express the appreciation I hold for all the people of Lexington who have made me feel welcome here. I am happy to be the new publisher of the *Advertiser*."³⁰

A few weeks after taking over the *Lexington Advertiser*, the paper celebrated its 105th anniversary. Brannon laid out her philosophy in her column:

Only by standing steadfast for right and progress can any newspaper prosper for 105 years. Only as a newspaper serves the people does it deserve to prosper...we'd like to say that we shall endeavor to render Lexington and Holmes county the service that only a good, home newspaper can give. We shall stand for upholding the traditions of the past and improving them; to publish a paper that is read from cover to cover wherever it goes. By honest, fair dealing and truly serving our readers we will be fulfilling the duties and obligations involved in a free press.³¹

Brannon could not have realized it at the time, but her commitment to "upholding the traditions of the past and improving them" presented the dilemma that would define her

²⁹ Stephen L. Vaughn, *Encyclopedia of American Journalism* (Boca Raton, FL: CRC Press, 2007) s.v. "Muckraking."

³⁰ *Lexington Advertiser*, 8 April 1943.

³¹ *Ibid.*, 22 April 1943.

career as well as demonstrate the complexity of being a southern white journalist in the post-World War II era. For most white southerners (including journalists), “upholding the traditions of the past” meant maintaining the accepted reality of Jim Crow segregation. As James Silver wrote in his 1964 book, *Mississippi: The Closed Society*, the overwhelming majority of white Mississippians stood "vigilant guard over the racial, economic, political, and religious orthodoxy of the state." As journalism scholar Susan Weill put it, the bulk of Mississippi editors and publishers thought that “socially responsible editorship” between the 1940s and 1960s meant “the maintenance of Mississippi society as they knew it—racially segregated with blacks in subservient roles as second-class citizens." For most whites, "the 'Closed Society' needed to remain that way."³²

Popular and growing more and more affluent, Brannon found her life and career squeezed between conflicting forces. A believer in the rightness of Jim Crow segregation, she was forced as a public commentator to address new ideas that challenged the old way of life between the late 1940s and 1960s. Her bedrock belief in responsible journalism and free speech put her in a position that severely threatened her popularity and her livelihood. Ironically, Brannon’s struggle with her neighbors over the maintenance of racial segregation emerged from a long editorial battle with illegal liquor, and the social, political, and legal issues it generated.

³² James Silver, *Mississippi the Closed Society* (New York: Harcourt, Brace & World, 1964), 30; Susan Weill, "Mississippi's Daily Press in Three Crises" in David Davies, ed., *The Press and Race: Mississippi Journalists Confront the Movement* (Jackson, Univ. Press of Mississippi, 2001), 51; See also Susan Weill, *In a Madhouse's Din: Civil Rights Coverage by Mississippi's Daily Press, 1948-1968* (Westport, Connecticut: Praeger, 2002).

To understand Brannon’s struggle with the atmosphere surrounding illegal liquor, it is necessary to understand some background on the Prohibition movement and the attempt to avoid it. Even though Congress ratified the Eighteenth Amendment in 1919 that banned the manufacture, sale, and transportation of alcohol, Mississippi had beaten the federal government to the punch by outlawing liquor in 1908. Yet, prohibitionists across the country found that many people still wanted to drink, and thus illegal or bootleg liquor became popular. With the outlawing of liquor in 1919, a vacuum was created. If you wanted a drink, where would you go? While many individuals decided to produce their own beverages, the largest distribution of alcohol came through the efforts of criminal syndicates. Illegal clubs known as “speakeasies” (speak the right word, and it was easy to get into) popped up in most American cities. In rural areas, bootleggers earned the title of “moonshiner” because they worked by the light of the moon to get their product to their customers. To avoid harassment by law officials, many bootleggers used bribes to insure that justice was indeed blind. Mississippi proved no different in this scenario.³³

Though the twenty-first amendment to the Constitution repealed national prohibition in 1933, southern states like Mississippi and Alabama continued to outlaw liquor. Officials in many areas, whether to please voters who wanted to drink or because they took bribes, turned a blind eye to the sale of liquor, and all the accoutrements that

³³ The term “bootleg” or “bootlegger” originates from the post-Civil War era when traders hid bottles of whiskey in their boots while soliciting Native American tribes. By the 1920s, the term “bootlegging” became synonymous with any attempt to sale illegal liquor. Ben Wynn, “Bootleg Alcohol” in Rachel Black, ed., *Alcohol in Popular Culture: An Encyclopedia* (Santa Barbara, Ca.: Greenwood Press, 2010), 35-36. See also Edward Behr, *Thirteen Years that Changed America* (New York: Arcade 1997); Edward Butts, *Outlaws of the Lakes: Bootlegging and Smuggling from Colonial Times to Prohibition* (New York: Thunderbay Press, 2004); John Kobler, *The Rise and Fall of Prohibition* (New York: De Capo Press, 1993).

followed along with it. These included clubs with live bands where customers could also find gambling, prostitutes, and narcotics.³⁴

By the World War II era, both Mississippi and Alabama contained notorious locales where alcohol, corruption, and vice all worked hand in hand. Many of the worst places were located near military bases as civilians flooded there for jobs and military personnel poured in for training. Phenix City, Alabama earned a reputation as one of the worst of these locales. The town lay just across the Chattahoochee River from Columbus, Georgia, the home of Fort Benning, a major U.S. Army training installation. Criminals ran the town and offered to unsuspecting soldiers the promise of pleasure and drinking. Instead, many soldiers endured knockout drugs, thefts, and terrible beatings. Some soldiers ended up dead, floating in the Chattahoochee River or lying on the bottom of the river, their feet encased in cement. In 1943, Secretary of War Henry Stimson investigated these incidents and branded Phenix City as the “wickedest city in the United States.” That same year, General George Patton was training his men at Fort Benning. Before he led his Third Army in a successful campaign against Germany in 1944, Patton grew so outraged at the abuse and exploitation in Alabama that he threatened to send tanks across the river and pulverize the town flat.³⁵

Biloxi, Mississippi, located on the Gulf of Mexico coast, possessed a similar reputation for offering illegal booze, gambling, prostitution, and other forms of vice to servicemen during and after the World War II era. Biloxi served as the home for Keesler Army Airfield. Over half a million soldiers matriculated through the base during the war.

³⁴ Ben Wynn, “Bootleg Alcohol,”³⁵

³⁵ Margaret Anne Barnes, *The Tragedy and the Triumph of Phenix City, Alabama* (Macon, Georgia: Mercer University Press, 1998), 17-18.

By 1950, the payroll at Keesler reached four million dollars a month. Of that amount, \$500,000 went to pay off gambling debts. Biloxi boasted of having over 300 clubs, and slot machines were found at every venue from bus stations to grocery stores. Desperate and in debt soldiers hocked their weapons, wrote bad checks, and fenced stolen military property. Two young lieutenants killed themselves over gambling debts in 1951. The U.S. Senate convened an investigation over the deaths and announced shocking findings. The Senate investigators reported that the “criminal enterprises in Biloxi” were “so open and fearless that it seemed as if the city was part of another lawless country.” Investigators revealed that the bosses of the criminal enterprises ran the city. A president of a prominent bank in Biloxi remarked matter of factly that gambling stood as the biggest business in town.³⁶

This problem of illegal booze and the sordid atmosphere it inculcated affected other parts of the state as well. Rankin County, just across the Pearl River from the state capital of Jackson had a reputation during this period as "a haven for bootleggers, as its corrupt sheriffs took payoffs to allow fairly open illicit liquor sales." As James Cobb noted, Mississippians split over the issue of alcohol. The scions of the richer Delta counties, with its productive soil and large plantations, favored drinking, and thus law enforcement officials did not take prohibition as seriously as the poorer and more evangelical residents of the hill counties. As noted earlier, Gulf Coast counties also wanted the free flowing liquor and all that came with it. Holmes County, the residence of

³⁶ Edward Humes, *Mississippi Mud: Southern Justice and the Dixie Mafia* (New York: Gallery Books, 2010), 116.

Hazel Brannon, contained both hills and delta, and had those who wanted the liquor to flow, and others who wanted the tap to run dry.³⁷

By the early 1940s, Durant and other small hamlets in Holmes County had earned a reputation for places to frequent if one wanted to drink, gamble, and party. One commentator noted that Durant, Goodman, and Pickens appeared to be quiet towns during the day, but hopped at night. All three hamlets resided on Highway 51 with Durant being fourteen miles north of Pickens, and Goodman in the middle, equidistant from both. Illegal but basically tolerated clubs lay outside the city limits of each municipality. Establishments that catered to African Americans were called “juke joints,” and white bars were known as “honky tonks.” They all boasted of “booze, brawling, girls, and gambling.” James Meredith, the first African American to integrate the University of Mississippi in 1962, grew up in Attala County, the eastern neighbor of Holmes County, just across the Big Black River. He recalled as a young man that if you wanted to have a good time that included beer and clubs, you went to Durant. He noted that Durant was also the place that you had to go if you wanted to catch the train to New Orleans, Memphis, or Chicago. He described his own county as “dry dry” and that sometimes people were arrested as they crossed back into Attala County for just having liquor on their breath. The booze and gambling scene was so well known that the clubs drew in soldiers from Camp McCain, a military base forty-five miles north of Durant³⁸

³⁷ James R. Crockett, *Operation Pretense: The FBI's Sting on County Corruption in Mississippi* (Jackson, Ms: University Press of Mississippi, 2003), 209; James Cobb, *The Most Southern Place on Earth: The Mississippi Delta and the Roots of Regional Identity*, 139-141.

³⁸ Stokes McMillan, *One Night of Madness* (Houston, Texas: Oak Harbor Publishing, 2009), 25; James Meredith, *3 Years in Mississippi* (selected writings), in Dorothy R. Abbot, ed., *Mississippi Writers: Reflections of Childhood and Youth, Vol. II: Nonfiction* (Jackson, Mississippi: University Press of Mississippi, 1986), 204.

As early as 1938, Brannon began condemning the county's approach liquor law enforcement. These words foreshadowed the crusade she led from the early 1940s well into the mid-1950s. She wrote, "Whiskey is a big business in Mississippi." She pointed out that everyone knew coastal towns like Biloxi and Mississippi River towns like Vicksburg and Natchez were doing a great business in contraband booze despite the illegality. Brannon surely did not appreciate the common joke about booze and Mississippi. It took many forms but the basic gist was "Mississippians will vote dry as long as they can stagger to the poles." This dichotomy created a ridiculous reality. Thus, she wrote, "the law should be either enforced or repealed." She noted that too many of "the 'nice people' of the state voted with the bootleggers." They both voted to "keep Mississippi legally dry." She surmised that the saints and sinners were joining hands to help promote "some of the most rotten conditions in the South." Both helped aid "the breakdown of respect for law observance. They are breeding conditions that lead to crime and everything for which it stands."³⁹

This antipathy toward the lack of prohibition should not be taken to mean that Brannon was a teetotaler. In fact, she was a social drinker. She did not have a problem with alcohol itself; she instead denounced the atmosphere of vice and corruption inspired by bootleg liquor.⁴⁰

³⁹ Hazel Brannon, *Durant News*, no month, 1938, quoted in John Whalen, *Maverick Under the Magnolias*, 49.

⁴⁰ Wendy Reed, *Hazel Brannon Smith: A Portrait of the Journalist as a Young Woman*, 1, starts her dissertation off with an FBI report on Hazel Brannon from 1941. A recruiter with the U.S. Navy reported to the FBI that he had visited the editor, and Brannon had made several disparaging comments about President Franklin Roosevelt. During the visit, Brannon offered the recruiter, "numerous drinks of whiskey" while asking a number of questions about the size and capability of the U.S. Navy; Gene Roberts and Hank Klibanoff, *The Race Beat: The Press, The Civil Rights Struggle, and The Awakening of a Nation* (New York: Vintage/Random House, 2007), 203, noted that Hazel Brannon Smith (her married name) and

Despite Brannon's personal proclivities toward drinking, by the time she took over the *Lexington Advertiser* in the spring of 1943, she thought that conditions in the county had worsened. In a brief memoir from 1983, Brannon laid out her fears concerning what she saw taking place in and around the county in the early 1940s. She recalled that while "Holmes County was a decent place to live and bring up a family...but there was trouble brewing in paradise." According to Brannon, more people were turning to illegal booze as a way of making a living. In fact, being connected to alcohol, "came to be known as one of the most lucrative professions in the county." She said many of the joints were off the main highway, back in the woods, but the clubs made sure they had a good road to lure customers in. To entice more customers, the bar owners brought in crap tables and slot machines so that customers would "stay longer, drink more, and gamble until they ran out of money. Grocery money was being spent on gambling and some young couples were having a hard time feeding themselves and their babies." Brannon thought the bootleggers positioned themselves as the movers and the shakers in the county, and were growing so powerful that they threatened the county's reputation and the livelihood of its citizens. Brannon determined that she would not stand for this. She remarked that it was one thing if the whiskey distributors stayed back off in the woods to provide what might be called "a legitimate demand for people who wanted to drink." It was totally unacceptable when "they moved out in the open, so that

her husband Walter Smith joined other like-minded journalists and friends in the early 1960s for social gatherings at editor Hodding Carter's home Feliciano in Greenville, Mississippi. There they would find solace from the tense situation brought on by the emerging civil rights movement. While there, the participants ate lots of food and consumed "copious amounts of contraband booze." Also, "Bloody Marys were the first sip of the day." In performing research in the Hazel Brannon Smith Papers at the Mitchell Library at Mississippi State University, this author found a wine catalogue from a distributor in Chicago, Illinois. So it's a reasonable assumption that Brannon drank.

you'd have it thrown in your face every time you rode down any of the highways outside town." Brannon believed she had an obligation to say something. Reflecting back on what drove her as a journalist, she wrote,

As the owner of the only two newspapers in a county without radio stations, I became the voice of Holmes County. I didn't consider myself all that important, but I considered it my responsibility to do what I could to promote a county in which everybody could live in peace and without fear.⁴¹

Thus, Brannon weighed into the issue beginning in 1943, and ended up waging over a decade long campaign against the state's hypocrisy over bootlegging and the corruption and vice that rose from it.

Brannon's crusade against contraband alcohol stemmed from the same concerns held by citizens surrounding places like Phenix City, Alabama. First, the prohibition law reeked of hypocrisy. Since prohibition remained on the books, the law needed to be enforced. On the other hand, if enough people wanted to drink, then the citizens should repeal the law, and the state could better regulate the substance and rake in the tax revenue. Brannon believed, and with good reason from what she saw in her own backyard, that allowing the law to be flouted only diminished people's respect for the law. The disregard for the law also encouraged the criminal element to defy it in even greater ways. To keep alcohol flowing, bootleggers bribed many public officials to turn a blind eye, not to mention using violence and con-artistry to bilk their customers of money, and sometimes their lives. Unregulated alcohol also increased the obvious problems of alcoholism, public drunkenness, and violent encounters. This fetid atmosphere only served to weaken the community spirit, sully its reputation, and provide

⁴¹ Hazel Brannon Smith, "Looking at the Old South Through Hazel Eyes."

a haven for lawlessness. From the early 1940s to the mid-1950s Brannon excoriated state and local officials as well as pleading with the public at large to act on this untenable situation. This willingness to challenge the status quo in the name of community improvement and service earned her the nickname “the fighting lady editor” and brought her fame and increased fortune. It also set the stage for an even greater fight in the 1950s and 1960s over racial extremism. The latter fight, however, would bring her ridicule, notoriety, and rejection by many of her peers. Yet, just like her liquor campaign, Brannon saw herself fighting for the public good.⁴²

Concerning the prohibition law, Brannon first took aim at the blatant hypocrisy of the statute. In late 1943, Smith noted that while Mississippi was supposed to be dry, and places like Memphis could legally sell liquor, there existed an interesting contradiction. She wrote, “There is more liquor in ‘dry’ Mississippi than in the liquor stores at Memphis.” She noted that bootleggers in Mississippi went to Memphis and bought liquor and then added ten dollars a case to sweeten the deal. The bootlegger did this knowing he could make a killing in Mississippi. Thus, people in Memphis who wanted to legally buy whiskey faced empty shelves while “every bootlegger in Mississippi has a good stock of almost any kind of whiskey you want on hand.” Brannon concluded that the “result is the drinker in Mississippi gets his liquor and folks in the wet states are

⁴² William Engle, “Fighting Lady Editor,” *San Antonio (Texas) Light*, 6 July 1947; Phenix City, Alabama earned the reputation as the “most wicked city in the United States” in 1943, and shockingly, conditions only got progressively worse over the next decade. In 1954, the country was shocked by the assassination of Albert Patterson on the streets of Phenix City. Patterson, a native of the town, ran for the state office of Attorney General. If elected, he promised to clean up the criminal element in Phenix City. His death prompted the governor of Alabama to declare martial law for the town. The National Guard disarmed the local police force, and a deputy sheriff was charged with the murder. The story was so sensational that in 1955, Hollywood produced a movie, *Phenix City*, based on the Patterson killing. This is the kind of future that Brannon feared happening in Holmes County. See Margaret Anne Barnes, *The Tragedy and the Triumph of Phenix City, Alabama* (Macon, Georgia: Mercer University Press, 1998).

rapidly learning to do without.” She challenged “the good church people” who wanted to stem the flow of alcohol “to stop cooperating with the bootleggers in maintaining the farce of prohibition. If liquor was legal in Mississippi, our present supply would be unattainable.”⁴³

Her disdain for the prohibition law only increased in the spring of 1944 as the Mississippi state legislature created a ten percent black market tax on illegal whiskey instead of performing the practical measure of legalizing alcohol across the board. She argued that the black market tax only promoted more skirting of the law by bootleggers and made enforcement of prohibition laws a joke. She asked, “How can a sheriff consistently go after the whiskey dealer when the state government recognizes him to the extent of levying a tax on him?” In Brannon’s mind, this tax reeked of dishonesty as well as being economically unsound. She questioned why the state did not legalize alcohol and take in all the tax revenue from its sale. She argued later in the spring of 1945 that the black market tax was not much better than giving a “wink to the bootlegger.” To have a law that clearly many did not want made a joke of the law and made Mississippi the “laughing stock of the nation.”⁴⁴

⁴³ *Lexington Advertiser*, 28 October 1943.

⁴⁴ *Ibid.*, 30 March 1944, 8 February 1945; Examples of similar comments in her columns can be found on 11 April, 1946, 13 March 1947, 10 July 1947; The black market tax continued until Mississippi abolished prohibition in 1966. William Winter served Mississippi as tax collector in the early 1960s and later as Governor in the late 1970s and early 1980s. In 1962, Winter’s salary came in second behind the President of the United States for public officials. He earned \$145,000 with most of it coming from the 10% black market tax on illegal alcohol. In his memoirs, Winter stated that he once visited a bootlegger that owned a warehouse that contained \$100,000 on liquor. The bootlegger paid \$12,000 in black market tax. Thus, Brannon’s chastisement proved valid since the state was collecting taxes on a substance that was by law, illegal to possess. See Norman Ritter, “A Tax on Lawbreakers Only, *Life*, 11 May 1962, 11-12; William F. Winter and Andrew P. Mullins, *The Measure of Our Days: Writings of William F. Winter* (Jackson, Ms.: University Press of Mississippi, 2006), 187-193.

Brannon not only unleashed her editorial wrath on state legislators, but also against local officials like sheriffs, district attorneys, and judges whom she felt were shirking their duty to uphold the law. Between 1944 and 1947, Holmes County Sheriff Walter Murtagh served as Brannon's main whipping boy. Murtagh had run on a campaign to clean up the county, but in Brannon's opinion, and eventually the opinion of many Holmes County citizens, Murtagh failed in his duty. Many times during his tenure, Brannon asked her readers if they believed Murtagh was simply incompetent or on the take. As Brannon later stated, Murtagh only made the bootlegging situation worse. She wrote in 1983,

After Walter became sheriff, bootlegging proliferated. The bootleggers ran the county. They all had Cadillacs and I don't think any of them had fewer than three cars. They spent more money than anyone else in Durant. And everyone knew about it, including the sheriff.⁴⁵

Brannon did not think the county wanted this kind of conduct, and she editorialized accordingly.

In column after column, Brannon detailed episodes and published state records that clearly mapped out the proliferation of illegal booze and gambling in the county as well as Murtagh's tepid and bewildering response to the situation. In November of 1945, Brannon noted that Murtagh raided two establishments and confiscated the liquor but had left the slot machines intact. She asked for a public response from the sheriff over this discrepancy, and when she did not get it, she left a blank space in the next week's paper as his reply. Brannon felt that Murtagh had possessed ample time to make a dent in the number of clubs that were open and the amount of liquor being sold. In her mind he had

⁴⁵ Hazel Brannon Smith, "Looking at the South Through Hazel Eyes."

failed miserably. She argued that it was one thing when bootleggers plied their trade in the backwoods; it was another when,

Today, however, liquor joints line the highway going in and out of most towns in the county. They don't just sell liquor quietly. They are the loudest places in town. They display prominently in their doors slot machines and other gambling devices. Some have combined dance halls with liquor and gambling. They flaunt it in the faces of the people...as well as the officers.⁴⁶

Brannon backed these charges up with records from the Mississippi State Tax Commission in December 1945 that showed that one man, T.E. "Ed" Weems, had sold \$221,000 worth of liquor in the county. To make matters worse, not only had Weems broken the law, he had not even paid the right amount of black market tax. His taxes only amounted to \$12,000 which amounted to only five percent. Brannon noted that the sheriff's office had only arrested Weems once, and that the bootlegger got off with a paltry \$100 fine. Brannon said that if one man could sell this much liquor with virtually no reprisals, then something was wrong with the law. She asked her readers, "Weems is either bigger than the law, or we don't have any law. Which is it?" She concluded that her readers needed to understand that bootleggers ran the county.⁴⁷

From time to time, Brannon defended her critical comments in her columns. She wanted to make sure her readers understand that this barrage of criticism did not stem from some personal vendetta against Murtagh or any other public official. Instead, Brannon believed she had an obligation as a journalist to be socially responsible. This

⁴⁶ *Lexington Advertiser*, 1, 8, November 1945.

⁴⁷ *Ibid.*, 13,20 December 1945. In the 7 February 1946 edition of the *Lexington Advertiser*, Brannon says that her sources revealed that Weems owned most of the slot machines in the county, even the ones in other clubs. From the fact that he sold 92% of the alcohol in the county, it is reasonable to surmise that he imported it and sold it to the other distributors and clubs in the county.

meant reporting conditions in the county, whether good or bad. She thought if the public possessed all the pertinent information, then they could make decisions that would best benefit the county. She rejected that idea that she was going out of her way to be a “lily white reformer or a crusader.” Instead, she was simply trying to “acquaint the people of Holmes County of conditions” that they faced. The editor understood that a large portion of the county wanted to drink alcohol. Thus for her, the logical step was for the state to legalize liquor. She believed that most of the county’s citizens loathed the open flaunting of the liquor laws, the wide open gambling, and the fact that organized crime in the county had bought “protection.” Like a cancer, these criminals were metastasizing. For that reason, she refused to stay silent.⁴⁸

Brannon’s spotlighting of the county’s conditions brought public outrage. On April 1, 1946, the Grand Jury in Holmes County met for just six hours but handed down zero indictments. Angered, Brannon sarcastically reported, “Holmes County must be doing fine.” It turned out that many citizens besides Brannon felt outrage over the court’s inactivity. A few weeks after the news broke about the Grand Jury inactivity, hundreds of citizens (including Brannon) signed a petition and sent it to Circuit Judge S.F. Davis. The petition denounced the Grand Jury’s inactivity and argued that juke joints with gambling machines were openly flouting the law and making conditions “absolutely inexcusable and intolerable” in the county. The petition charged that the Grand Jury had been derelict in its duty and pleaded with Judge Davis, District Attorney Howard Dyer,

⁴⁸ Ibid., 11 April 1946.

and County Attorney Pat Barrett to investigate conditions concerning illegal liquor and gambling.⁴⁹

In response, Davis reconvened the Grand Jury in mid-April and subpoenaed a large number of the petitioners. This caused a furor around the county among petitioners who felt they were being persecuted. In a front-page article “Why This Furore, [sic]” Smith reported that Davis disparaged the petition in open court. She quoted Davis who said the petition served as, “an indictment against the Grand Jury and every officer in this county.” Davis surmised that if the petition was true, then it spoke “bad for the county.” If false, the petition served as a “a libelous article against every officer.” Brannon fired back at Judge Davis. She bellowed, “Holmes County is not Germany yet!” She charged that the subpoenas served an attempt to intimidate and silence those who wanted conditions changed. She argued that a state took the first step toward totalitarianism when it tried to quash the freedom of the press.⁵⁰

Brannon’s editorials plus public outrage did, however, bring results. The Grand Jury convened again in April of 1946 and brought fifty two true bills of indictment concerning liquor and gambling. County Attorney Pat Barrett placed several clubs like the Rainbow Gardens and the Circle Inn under injunction to refrain from serving alcohol or allowing gambling on the premises. Twelve bootleggers were arrested, but the notorious Ed Weems fled the county to avoid prosecution. Brannon reported six weeks later that things had quieted down around Durant. Several of the bootleggers had served some time, and no one reported seeing any gambling devices in the open. However, in

⁴⁹ Ibid., 4, 18 April 1946.

⁵⁰ Ibid., 18 April 1946.

other parts of the county, she noted that some clubs still used slot machines, and a black club seven miles south in the town of Goodman was going “full throttle.” She reminded Murtagh, “These places need cleaning up now Mr. Sheriff.”⁵¹

Though things quieted down for several months, the editor did not believe the problem had been overcome. She believed the community needed to be continually updated in order to remain diligent. In October 1946, Brannon reminded her readers that the fifty two indictments handed down by the Grand Jury in April came only because hundreds of citizens made their desire known for more law and order. She reported that the notorious Ed Weems had been seen in the county periodically. Although Sheriff Murtagh swore before the Grand Jury to clean up the county, Brannon concluded, “Holmes County has not been cleaned up.” Her sources told her that the old clubs had returned to the free flow of alcohol and the whirl of the slot machines. Even worse, liquor dealers began constructing two more clubs right outside of Durant. She stated, “They must be under the impression they will be allowed to operate.” She warned her readers that the liquor interests were taking over everything “but the churches” and growing in power every day. She claimed a man who had sat on the Grand Jury was known to be a prominent bootlegger in the western delta part of the county. According to Brannon, people were kidding themselves if they refused to recognize the county’s bootleggers possessed a pipeline to all the deliberations of the Grand Jury proceedings.

⁵¹ Ibid., 25 April, 6 June 1946.

Brannon pleaded with District Attorney Howard Dyer to perform his sworn duty and clean up the county.⁵²

By the spring of 1947, Brannon again took Circuit Judge S.F. Davis to task for his laissez faire attitude toward bootleggers. She quoted Davis's comments to the Grand Jury concerning the state of affairs in the county. Davis opined that Holmes County stood in no worse condition than any other county in the state. He surmised if things in the county were half as bad as alleged, he would have brought in the Army. Davis said, "If you believe what you hear, the Sheriff of Holmes County has been bribed and the Judge is a crook." With an apparent slap at Brannon, he said "But things are easy to charge and hard to prove." Davis went on to admonish the Grand Jury in session and said it was impossible to enforce the prohibition laws. He suggested that the only solution was an inner change brought on by Christian conversion, and if things were as bad as claimed, the county needed to bring in the famed evangelist Gypsy Smith. Davis reminded the Grand Jury they would never have a perfect sheriff or perfect law enforcement. Thus, if people wanted the bars to close, then they needed to boycott them.⁵³

Brannon argued that tax-paying citizens had a right to expect elected officials to do their duty, and thus she castigated Davis for his apparent unconcern. She reminded the judge that he had sworn an oath to uphold the law. She concluded that even if the prohibition laws could not be perfectly enforced, that did not mean the legal authorities should refrain from any attempt whatsoever. For Brannon, a judge had no right to make

⁵² Ibid., 3 October 1946.

⁵³ Ibid., 10 April 1947.

such public statements. She thought it obvious that if Davis refused to carry out his oath, then he should not have sworn to it in the first place. Thus, she believed that the judge's comments proved himself as incompetent at Sheriff Murtagh. Brannon wrote, "Is he not placing himself squarely beside our Sheriff who has almost completely fallen down on his job of law-enforcement?" She went on to say that Davis held the citizens of Holmes County in contempt by expecting them to make arrests and produce evidence of bootlegging instead of holding the Sheriff to task. She concluded that if David did not think the prohibition laws could not be enforced, then he "should either change his attitude immediately...or resign from the bench."⁵⁴

While Judge Davis dismissed Brannon's allegations of wide spread chaos due to rampant alcohol, many of Brannon's readers did not. In May 1947, Brannon reported that fifteen members of the adult Sunday school class at the Pickens Methodist Church notified Sheriff Murtagh of their visit to Pete's Place, a Pickens nightclub. A man named Pete McLean had owned the club. McLean had recently died during an altercation with his brother in law. After being closed for thirty days, McLean's wife had reopened the club. The Methodist church members took it upon themselves to warn the club to stay closed because it stood as a nuisance and a danger to the community. They promised to bring forth charges in order to protect "the children and young people of the community." The Sunday School class then demanded that Murtagh should keep an eye on the place and issue warnings to the surrounding night clubs.⁵⁵

⁵⁴ Ibid., 10 April 1947.

⁵⁵ Ibid., 8 May 1947.

A few days later, alarmed citizens met at the Durant High School Auditorium and formed the Holmes County Enforcement League (HCEL). They agreed their ultimate goal was to get “relief from the lawlessness in our towns and county.” The members of the League passed a motion to call Sheriff Murtagh before the HCEL and demand answers for his official conduct. They set a meeting for the following week. Brannon congratulated the League’s initiative. In response to the meeting she wrote, “The tide has very slowly begun to turn. An aroused citizenship is beginning to assert itself and demand what every citizen has the right to expect...good law-enforcement.” She urged the League to call for Murtagh to get rid of the bootleggers or resign.⁵⁶

At the next meeting of the HCEL, concerned citizens met with Sheriff Murtagh, but also faced a number of bootleggers determined to intimidate the crowd into silence. Brannon reported that the League members asked for Murtagh’s resignation, but that he only replied with a shake of the head. When asked if he would bring in state officials and possible military force, again Murtagh simply shook his head. Brannon noted that several bootleggers tried to pick fights with League members. One even opened a bottle of whiskey and offered a drink to the adults and children in the meeting.⁵⁷

Brannon concluded that the brazenness of the bootleggers shocked many of the participants at the meeting. In reality, the actions of the bootleggers only spurred more people to join the HCEL. She wrote that it was obvious, ‘that Holmes County’s bootleggers are organized to a man...and that they are prepared to resort to any means to protect their illegal whiskey and gambling business that runs into hundred of thousands

⁵⁶ Ibid., 15 May 1947.

⁵⁷ Ibid., 22 May 1947

of dollars.” With the sheriff election coming up in the fall, Brannon asked her readers what kind of official did the people want? She asked if they wanted conditions to get worse or would the people “elect a man who stands for the right, one who cannot be bought and one who will clean up this county and keep it clean?” In all this, Brannon saw her newspaper as a vehicle for helping to improve the community. If improving the community meant taking on official malfeasance, then so be it.⁵⁸

Along with Brannon’s belief that the prohibition law (and its lack of enforcement) spawned hypocrisy, corruption, and greater lawlessness, she also stressed that county could not bear the ever-growing personal toll. In her columns throughout the decade of 1943 to 1953, she reported on the fear, the violence, the drunken driving accidents, and the terrible reputation spawned by illegal alcohol. In March of 1947, she reported on the alcohol induced accident that took the life of P.H. “Doc” Winborn. Winborn had served in World War II and came from a prominent Durant family. Winborn died in a head on collision on Highway 51 north of Durant with an intoxicated bootlegger named John Beckworth. John Rowland, Beckworth’s boss, had sent the man on a liquor run to north Mississippi. The crash occurred on Beckworth’s return trip. The Grand Jury refused to bring charges against Rowland earlier that year over a shootout with two Durant town Marshals who had tried to apprehend Rowland on a liquor possession charge. Outraged, Brannon wrote that if the legal system had done its job there “would have been one less grave in the Durant Cemetery.” She charged that bootleg joints “infest the highways” in the county. She attributed all the drunk driving arrests to the growth of bootleg clubs. She asked how long would the citizens of the county put up with the state of affairs.

⁵⁸ Ibid., 22 May, 5, 12 June 1947.

Brannon warned, “Those persons who cannot ‘see any harm’ in these liquor places should think a second time before they make such a careless statement. The victim of the next drunken driver may be your boy, girl [sic]. It might even be YOU (her capitalization).” The editorial brought an award to Brannon. In 1948, the National Federation of Women’s Clubs awarded her with its first place prize for an editorial in a weekly newspaper.⁵⁹

Brannon went even further to shed light on the egregious conditions inspired by atmosphere of illegal alcohol. In March 1947, she informed her readers that many of the illicit clubs employed underage “hostesses.” This was a polite way of saying prostitutes. From her investigations, it was clear that minors could easily purchase liquor at any of the open joints. The editor bluntly declared she owed no apology to those who thought her reporting was too shocking for the public to bear. She wrote, “If standing for law enforcement and decency is being a fanatic, if wishing for clean, wholesome conditions in Holmes County is being a fanatic, then your writer proudly claims to be a fanatic.”⁶⁰

On top of the personal toll, Brannon said the hypocrisy of the black market tax blackened the reputation of the entire state. She surmised that the rest of the country laughed at the state and viewed Mississippi as a place that contained “a people of grafters, chislers [sic], and hypocritical saints.” She once again put forth her case that either the state should legalize liquor and leave sales up to local voters and take in every tax dollar allowed, or enforce the prohibition laws strenuously.⁶¹

⁵⁹ Ibid., 6 March 1947.

⁶⁰ Ibid., 20 March 1947

⁶¹ Ibid., 13 March 1947.

As the Sheriff's election of 1947 approached, Brannon issued a call to the 3,600 white voters in the county to take matters into their own hands and elect a sheriff who would enforce the law and clean up the county. She also defended her stand against those who claimed she was a busy body and a do-gooder, and horror of horrors, a Yankee. She once again denied being "a lily-white reformer" and said she had no desire to deny anyone pleasure, but she believed that open bootlegging and the mushrooming of night clubs and gambling joints only encouraged the criminal and lower class elements to come into the county. She considered the proliferation of nightclubs as counter-productive for the community in regards to the erosion of community standards and reputation as well as driving away potential businesses who might move to the county. She thought she was voicing the concerns of the county and urged the voters to elect a man who would clean up the county. The *American Weekly* magazine had spotlighted Brannon's law and order campaign in their June 6, 1947 issue. Someone started a rumor that a "Yankee" paper was praising Brannon, a serious charge to defend in a rural southern community in the 1940s. Brannon scoffed at the notion. She reminded her readers that while eight million people nationwide read the magazine, she only needed the approval of the citizens of Holmes County. She believed the rumor was an attempt to derail her two-year battle to bring law and order back to the county. She concluded, "We're in the business to serve the people of Holmes County and their interests...that we will always strive to do." In late August, Holmes County elected Ellis Wynn as Sheriff. Wynn ran on a law and order platform. Brannon commented, "Our faith in the people of Holmes County has been justified."⁶²

⁶² Ibid., 31 July, 14, 21, 28 August 1947. According to the Mississippi law of the time, a sheriff

Wynn did not take office until January 1948, and an incident occurred at a Durant night club in late 1947 that clearly demonstrated to Brannon the county's need for a serious law and order sheriff. In September 1947, Brannon reported that the Marshall "Blackjack" Powell and his brother Olander, owners of the notorious Durant night spot the Rainbow Gardens, beat three out-of-town patrons who had stopped at the club. Reportedly, the three men were returning home from a football game at the University of Mississippi in Oxford and had stopped in for some drinking and gambling. The three out-of-towners lost over \$200 while gambling and got into a fracas with the Powell brothers. Brannon stated that the Powells and their henchmen worked over the three men using blackjacks and brass knuckles. Supposedly, someone called Sheriff Murtagh, but he never arrived at the scene. In a front-page editorial entitled "This Has Gone Far Enough," Brannon excoriated Murtagh and asked for state intervention. She said,

The citizens of Holmes County may as well face it. We have no protection whatsoever from the Sheriff's office as now run in Holmes County. Sheriff Murtagh either will not or cannot enforce the law in Holmes County...certainly he is not enforcing the law in any way connected with the operation of the numerous lawless dives and joints...and it looks like he's downright afraid to cross any of the lawless element in Holmes County.⁶³

She pointed out that Murtagh had testified before the Grand Jury earlier in September that he had not found any liquor or gambling machines at the Rainbow Gardens, yet the incident happened two nights later. She opined, "The situation is rotten to the core." She argued that the only hope for the county was for the Governor to intervene. She charged, "This has gone on far enough. We appeal to Governor Wright to do something about

could not serve consecutive terms, so Walter Murtagh was not allowed to run for reelection in 1947.

⁶³ Ibid., 25 September 1947.

it...and now.” Wright did not intervene then, but Holmes County did take a different turn in regards to tolerance of bootlegging under the administration of incoming Sheriff Ellis Wynn.⁶⁴

In the years between 1948 and 1951, Holmes County experienced a new level of law enforcement, and that pleased editor Hazel Brannon. Ellis Wynn ran on a campaign promise to enforce the prohibition laws and crack down on the nightclubs with all of their assorted vices. The bootlegging and the nightclubs did not disappear during this period, but Wynn did make a major dent in regards to how openly liquor and gambling interests conducted business. In January 1948, Brannon wrote a column wishing Wynn success and reminded him that he had received a mandate and a trust from the people of Holmes County. Wynn took that mandate and ran with it.⁶⁵

In his four years in office, Wynn issued 549 warrants concerning alcohol related arrests. He and other law officials destroyed 116 stills and 585 barrels of bootleg liquor. Law officers arrested 242 people for sale or possession of illegal booze, confiscated 14 vehicles, and collected over \$30,000 in fines. Wynn coordinated many of his efforts with state and federal officials.⁶⁶

In 1951, Wynn requested that Governor Fielding Wright send in the state National Guard. Brannon Smith splashed across the front page a sting by local and state officials along with a number of guardsmen. The raid encompassed twenty-one nightclubs across the county, resulting in the arrest of twenty-nine people and the seizing \$25,000 in cash,

⁶⁴ Ibid., 25 September 1947.

⁶⁵ Ibid., 8 January 1948.

⁶⁶ Hazel Brannon married Walter Smith in late 1950. From that point on, she went by the professional name, Hazel Brannon Smith. Brannon Smith totaled up Wynn’s career in the *Lexington Advertiser*, 3 January 1952

weapons, and gambling paraphernalia. Brannon Smith admitted that the haul of weapons stunned her and should have shocked her readers. Noting the guns, black jacks, and brass knuckles, she surmised that Durant was living up to the nickname of “Little Chicago” since the paraphernalia matched the kind used by gangsters in big metropolises like the Windy City. She pleaded with her readers to be diligent in their concern for law and order. While everyone agreed that Sheriff Wynn deserved a commendation, Brannon Smith opined that conditions would only improve if citizens did their duty. She concluded, “The truth about the matter is too many of our leading citizens in the county are afraid they’ll lose a few dollars worth of business if they dare cross the bootleggers.” Brannon Smith urged her readers to support the sheriff and serve on jury duty if called. Yet, even with a lot of work still to be done, Wynn had made a major dent in the bootlegging business in Holmes County. After the raid, the Greenville *Delta Democrat-Times* quoted Wynn’s conclusion that the county was “bone dry and law abiding.” Throughout his tenure, Smith praised Wynn for living up to his oath as sheriff. She thought the county had found the man to enforce the law and clean up the county. Thus, Hazel Brannon Smith’s five-year crusade (1946-1951) for law and order had born fruit.⁶⁷

Her willingness to take on issues earned her recognition and awards, as well as provided her a good living. Newspapers outside of Mississippi published articles on “The Fight Lady Editor’s” struggle against the atmosphere of bootleg liquor. Nationally syndicated columnist Walter Winchell mentioned Brannon Smith for her “amazing newspapering” in digging up enough information to bring the Grand Jury indictments.

⁶⁷ Ibid., 5 April 1951. Wynn quote in Greenville Delta Democrat-Times, 2 April 1951; Concerning the National Guard raid, see also Barry M. Stentiford, *The American Home Guard: The State Militia in the Twentieth Century* (College Station, Texas: Texas A&M University Press, 2002), 204.

As owner of the *Durant News* and the *Lexington Advertiser*, she was popular and flush with prosperity. She bought the latest Italian purse from stores like Neiman Marcus and wore “Lily Dache hats.” When she was still single in 1948, syndicated columnist Dorothy Doan noted Brannon had “more suitors than a Magnolia tree has blooms.” She drove a Cadillac convertible and took time off several times a year to take trips to places like New York City and Europe as well as round the world cruises.⁶⁸

Brannon Smith’s rising economic status did not dampen her editorial fire as she entered the 1950s. She continued to battle against the conditions fostered by illegal liquor. While Sheriff Wynn decreased the influence of honkytonks and its owners, the mêlée was far from being over in 1951. Thus, Brannon Smith urged the electorate to choose a man who would follow the path of Ellis Wynn. According to Mississippi election law at the time, a county sheriff could not serve two consecutive terms. In August 1951, Brannon Smith wrote that Wynn had driven many of the bootleggers and gamblers out of the county, but like circling vultures, they were hoping to get a man in office who would let them back in. Candidate Richard F. Byrd did not seem to fit that bill. He promised in a campaign ad in the *Advertiser* that he would continue Wynn’s crack down on bootleggers, gamblers, and cattle thieves. In late August 1951, Byrd won

⁶⁸ William Engle, “Fighting Lady Editor,” *San Antonio (Texas) Light*, 6 July 1947; Walter Winchell, “On Broadway” *Burlington (NC) Daily Times*, 26 June 1950; Dorothy Doan, “Woman Editor Makes Good in Big Way,” Long Beach, California *Independent*, 12 August 1948; Brannon Smith noted stopping at a Neiman Marcus store while in Dallas Texas, *Lexington Advertiser*, 2 November 1950; Lilly Dache (1898-1989) was a famous hat designer who created distinctive designs for Hollywood actresses like Audrey Hepburn and Marlene Dietrich, see her obituary by Bernadine Morris, *New York Times*, 2 January 1990.

the election. In her column on August 30, Brannon Smith recounted Byrd's campaign promises and urged the citizens of Holmes County to support him in his endeavors.⁶⁹

For the most part, Byrd seemed to follow in the path of his predecessor for 1952 and 1953. In early 1952, Brannon Smith posted on the front page Byrd's challenge for bootleggers and slot machine owners to get out of the county. He promised to raid drinking establishments and arrest patrons found in possession of booze. Brannon Smith congratulated Byrd and promised to drum up support for him. She then challenged her readers. She advised them to stay away from the nightclubs, to do their civic duty and serve on juries when called. She promised that her readers would have a full disclosure of Byrd's official activities. She also issued a stiff warning. She advised that if citizens did not want their names published in the paper, then they needed to refrain from patronizing bootleg establishments and thus avoid arrest. Brannon Smith reminded her readers that they had to be active in making the community a better place. Like his predecessor, Byrd hit bootleg clubs hard for the next several months. Many operations went underground or ceased operation and thus and less and less news about them appeared in Brannon Smith's papers through the rest of 1952 and 1953.⁷⁰

Yet, as 1954 dawned, Hazel Brannon Smith found herself at odds with Richard Byrd much like she had been with Sheriff Walter Murtagh in the previous decade. Brannon Smith came to believe that Byrd had abandoned his oath to crack down on bootleggers. Also, he had developed a growing reputation abusing African Americans in the county as well as trying to intimidate whites who challenged his authority. Her public

⁶⁹ *Lexington Advertiser* 23, 30 August 1951.

⁷⁰ *Ibid.*, 10 January 1952.

battle with Byrd in the first half of 1954 took place against the backdrop of the coming storm that was the May 1954 Supreme Court decision of *Brown v. Board Of Education of Topeka*, the turning point in the overturning of Jim Crow segregation in the South.

Brannon Smith's belief that her paper was to be the protector of the community's health and well-being would actually bring the wrath of the community upon her when she questioned whites in Holmes County for their efforts to maintain the racial status quo.

CHAPTER III

"THIS IS WHITE MAN'S COUNTRY AND BOTH RACES KNOW IT": DEFENDING OF JIM CROW

Looking back over her first decade and a half in Holmes County, Hazel Brannon had to regard these years as a smashing success. She had arrived in central Mississippi in 1936 and bought the broken down *Durant News*. Through charisma and hard work, she turned it into a moneymaker by 1940. She built on this success and bought the *Lexington Advertiser* in 1943. This venture proved to be a financial boon as well. Along with the money, her investigative reporting skills and willingness to speak out on issues like bootleg liquor earned her a state and national reputation as a tough reporter and savvy businesswoman. Life was good, and she enjoyed the fruits of her labors and the attention she received from the most eligible bachelors in Mississippi. She wore the latest fashions, took trips to Europe, and sailed on world and Caribbean cruises. Looking back on her life at mid-century, she later reminisced:

My life had always been comfortable in Lexington. My two papers in Holmes County were paid for. I wore good clothes, and drove a Cadillac convertible. I went to Europe on vacation for four months and had more money in my bank account when I returned than I did when I left.¹
Brannon's situation stood in stark contrast to that of the 29,000 black residents of

Holmes County. These individuals, like all African Americans in Mississippi, lived

¹ Hazel Brannon Smith, "Bombed, Burned, and Boycotted," in *An American Community Newspaper Under Pressure*, Alicia Patterson Fellowship, 1984, Accessed 10 January 2012, <http://aliciapatterson.org/stories/bombed-burned-and-boycotted>.

under the domination of Jim Crow racism. For white leaders, maintaining the racial hierarchy stood as the number one priority. Though the Civil War had ended slavery nearly a century earlier, white southerners regained power during the Reconstruction era. From the 1870s onward, they worked to marginalize black southerners. All across the old Confederacy, state and local governments employed legal and illegal means, overt and covert violence, and economic intimidation to subjugate their black residents. Sometimes this message of domination dwelt below the surface, other times it stood out in the wide open. As one Mississippi newspaper put it in May of 1889, “Don’t monkey with white supremacy; it is loaded with determination, gunpowder, and dynamite.” Holmes County (and all of Mississippi for that matter) followed this same pattern well into the twentieth century.²

Compared to the life Hazel Brannon experienced, African Americans in Holmes County might as well have lived on the moon. While Brannon chased her dreams of journalistic public service, personal notoriety, and financial independence, the county’s black residents struggled against poverty, personal humiliation, and the ever-present threat of violence. Chalmers Archer, Jr., grew up near Lexington in the 1930s and 1940s. His viewpoint on that time drastically differed from Brannon’s. For African Americans, Lexington was not a place of opportunity. Instead, it was “a separate and unequal place.” In Archer’s world, whites Mississippians forbade African Americans from

² Holmes County had 39,000 residents in 1940, 29,000 (75%) of which were African American; Quote found in Neil R. McMillen, *Dark Journey: Black Mississippians in the Age of Jim Crow* (Urbana, Illinois: University of Illinois Press, 1990), 3. McMillen’s book is the definitive work on the conditions black Mississippians faced between Reconstruction and World War II. Holmes County lies in what McMillen calls the “Black Belt” counties of Mississippi. These either lay either wholly or partly in the Delta. They are counties where the black population reaches 70% or better. The western third of Holmes County rests in the Delta.

approaching the front door of a white home. An African American who either boldly or forgetfully disregarded this unspoken law faced a stern reprimand, or more likely, violence. Archer pointed out that segregation bore down on black Mississippians on all fronts. Every public facility practiced segregation. Some restaurants made it clear that they did not want black patrons to come even to the back door. They did not want black patrons period. In Archer's world, white policemen knew that they could shoot black people without fear of retribution from an all-white jury. He concluded that black life in Mississippi consisted of,

... a time of murders, lynchings, and disappearances. Mississippi was a cornucopia of rich soil, the scent of magnolias, blood and violence. Those were the days when fears and hatreds haunted a troubled land. It was time when black people's lives and the lives of their family were always on the line. There was a pervasive feeling among black people that whatever they said or did about anything would make absolutely no difference.³

Black visitors unlucky enough to venture into Holmes County also experience this kind of oppression. In 1931, Sam Edwards, a member of the U.S. Coast Guard, ran afoul of the law while traveling through Holmes County on his way north to visit his mother in Greenwood, the county seat of nearby Leflore County. When Edwards stopped in the Holmes County hamlet of Tchula, a local official arrested the Guardsman for trespassing without money. The town judge tried Edwards in the back room of a country store. When Edwards produced money, the judge changed the charge to vagrancy. When queried by the judge about his experiences, Edwards admitted he had never picked cotton. Astounded, the town's magistrate vowed to send Edwards to a place where he "could learn." The court sentenced Edwards to thirty days at hard labor, and levied a

³ Chalmers Archer, Jr., *Growing Up Black in Rural Mississippi: Memories of a Family Heritage of a Place* (New York: Walker and Company, 1992), 43, 125.

twenty dollar fine. Edwards then endured thirty six days at a plantation owned by the father of the law officer who had arrested him. While incarcerated, Edwards received several beatings with a seven-pound strap. What offenses had he committed? The guards thrashed Edwards for writing to his commanding officer; for drinking two cups of water instead of one; for picking less than one hundred pounds of cotton in a prescribed period; and for breaking a hoe handle. He managed to gain his release after bribing his black straw boss with a seven dollar watch. Edwards later testified that sixteen or seventeen black men also served as inmates at the plantation and endured slavery-like conditions.⁴

Hazel Brannon not only did not experience this kind of world, she rarely noted it in the first two decades of her career. As her columns from the mid-1930s to the early 1950s demonstrate, she believed that segregation and the “southern way of life” best suited Mississippi and the South. It is important to put Brannon in the context of how white leaders in the South viewed racial issues. As historians have noted, Jim Crow served as the “calculated campaign by white elites to circumscribe all possibility of African American political, economic, and social power.” Hazel Brannon fit squarely in this group. Her newspaper success made her richer than most of her neighbors. She went to locales around the world that most of her readers could only dream of. As a journalist, she believed herself to be the voice for the public’s interest, or more specifically, the white public’s interest. Surveying her columns for the first twenty years, it becomes

⁴ James C. Cobb, *The Most Southern Place on Earth: The Mississippi Delta and the Roots of Regional Identity* (New York: Oxford, 1992), 121; See David Oshinsky, *Worse Than Slavery: Parchman Farm and the Ordeal of Jim Crow Justice* (New York: Free Press/Simon and Schuster, 1996).

abundantly clear that she thought the white public's interest revolved around maintaining white supremacy.⁵

Brannon's writings in the 1940s and early 1950s not only criticized the corruption and lawlessness spawned by prohibition, they also staunchly defended white supremacy. As Jason Morgan Ward pointed out, many whites of Brannon's generation thought that the race question had been settled with the establishment of Jim Crow back in the 1880s and 1890s. For Brannon and her journalistic peers, "black subordination affirmed a natural order." White democracy in the South stood on the pillars of black disfranchisement and segregation. Brannon mirrored white society in its rejection of any attempts by African Americans or the federal government to make inroads toward rectifying racial inequality. World War II provided for African Americans and their allies in Washington a number of opportunities to make civil rights gains. Thus, Brannon sided with her peers' sophisticated responses in order to maintain segregation and racial integrity. Historians have noted that while African Americans refused to remain static and sought new ways to oppose Jim Crow in the 1930s and 1940s, "white supremacy remodeled itself to meet any challenge."⁶

In her newspapers, three characteristics emerge in Brannon's defense of white supremacy. All three mirror the attitudes of the majority of white southern journalists. First, Brannon believed that the federal government needed to stay out of southern affairs concerning race. She feared the presidential administrations of Franklin Roosevelt and

⁵ Jane Dailey, Glenda Elizabeth Gilmore, and Bryant Simon, eds., "Introduction," *Jumpin Jim Crow: Southern Politics From Civil War to Civil Rights* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton Univ. Press, 2000), 4.

⁶ Jason Morgan Ward, *Defending White Democracy: The Making of a Segregationist Movement and the Remaking of Racial Politics, 1936-1965* (Chapel Hill, NC: University of North Carolina Press, 2011), 1-4; Jane Dailey, "Introduction," *Jumpin Jim Crow*, 4.

Harry S. Truman and their moves on civil rights issues. In Brannon's mind, greater civil rights for black southerners spelled the end of white supremacy and would result in the ultimate disaster: revolution, miscegenation, and chaos. As Ward argues, "While Roosevelt did little to directly challenge Jim Crow, some southern whites warned that federal expansion and liberal social programs would erode white supremacy." From the mid-1930s through the start of the World War II, "Jim Crow's defenders increasingly linked 'Rooseveltianism' to racial revolution."⁷

Second, Brannon's columns and articles revealed that she sincerely believed that black and white Mississippians had a mutually beneficial relationship. In her mind, both groups found harmony and contentment in a system that promoted segregation. In fact, she wrote many articles highlighting the efforts of African Americans living Holmes County. More specifically, she focused on those who achieved a measure of success within Jim Crow. This "success" of some African Americans served as a counter weight to charges from outside over the inequality of Jim Crow segregation.⁸

Third, while Brannon did not question the rightness of white supremacy, she did at times report and comment on episodes where African Americans experienced egregious treatment at the hands of their white neighbors. During the 1940s and early 1950s, Jim Crow appeared to be a relatively stable institution. Thus, Brannon did not face any significant criticism for these kinds of reports. Indeed, in Brannon's view, one benefit of a rigid system of segregation was that it did not focus on violence or unfairness.

⁷ Jason Morgan Ward, *Defending White Democracy*, 3.

⁸ Examples can be found in *Lexington Advertiser*, 12, 19 December 1946, 4 November 1948

Ironically, Brannon did not consider the Jim Crow system inherently unequal until the summer of 1954 when her crusade against bootlegging and official corruption collided with an episode of racial violence. Before 1954, Brannon clearly affirmed the logic and rightness of white supremacy. Brannon's views matched those of her journalistic contemporaries. As James Silver noted, the Mississippi Press stood "vigilant guard over the racial, economic, political, and religious orthodoxy of the state." Brannon proudly counted herself a part of this group. From 1954 on, however, events forced Brannon to rethink her beliefs, a reflection that eventually placed her outside mainstream white thought concerning race. She and her readers faced the challenges of the emerging civil rights movement in the late 1950s and on into the 1960s. Brannon evolved. Most of her white reading audience did not. Thus, a conflict of massive proportions ensued.⁹

When the Great Depression hit, southerners of all stripes felt its devastation, and thus, southern Democrats clamored for the federal patronage offered through Roosevelt's New Deal programs. That being said, they balked at the unintended consequence of greater black participation in the political, economical, and social realm. As Joseph Lowndes pointed out, the New Deal brought economic benefits and "improved the lot of a majority" of black and white southerners. In regards to black southerners, "the Democratic Party promised little and delivered less for African Americans in terms of opposing Jim Crow laws, supporting anti-lynching legislation, and eliminating job discrimination." While the New Deal brought greater relief and employment opportunities than the three previous Republican administrations, President Roosevelt moved very slowly toward racial reform because he relied on southern Democrats to pass

⁹ James Silver, *Mississippi: The Closed Society* (New York: Houghton Mifflin, 1964), 30.

his programs. Lowndes concluded, “Nevertheless, Democratic rhetoric and limited practices of inclusion and enfranchisement would later force liberals to deal with black civil, political, and economic rights.” The remote possibility that Roosevelt’s New Deal might open the door to greater black engagement in American (and more specifically white southern) society deeply alarmed Brannon and her peers.¹⁰

During the 1940s, Brannon condemned any individual or federal policy that even remotely hinted at blurring the color line. For example, Brannon rebuked First Lady Eleanor Roosevelt for her civil rights activities during World War II. In 1943, Roosevelt came out against the poll tax which mandated that all citizens had to pay a fee in order to vote. The designers of the tax sought mainly to preclude most African Americans from voting since the majority of southern blacks could not afford the cost. As Allida Black pointed out, Roosevelt had not always been a champion of civil rights, but once she became aware of the abuses African Americans “suffered at the hands of the American democracy ... she reluctantly but consistently confronted this undemocratic behavior and called it by its rightful name.” Roosevelt’s speaking out ruffled Brannon’s feathers. Brannon thought Mrs. Roosevelt had overstepped her role as wife of the President. Brannon charged that the poll tax came under the purview of the states, and that Congress and Mrs. Roosevelt needed to focus more on winning the war and not stirring up trouble. The editor found the very idea of abolishing the poll offensive and assumed it also offended her readers. She urged Mrs. Roosevelt to “just keep off the lecture platform for the rest of her husband’s tenure in the White House and we would be glad. There are

¹⁰ Joseph E. Lowndes, *From the New Deal to the New Right: Race and the Southern Origins of Modern Conservatism* (New Haven, Conn.: Yale University Press, 2008), 13.

millions of people who feel that she would contribute toward winning the war just by remaining quiet.” Brannon missed the irony of her challenge. She, a woman journalist, openly espoused her views while denying Eleanor Roosevelt the same privilege.¹¹

As the country geared up for war with Germany and Japan, Brannon believed that any attempt by the federal government to force racial equality created a recipe for disaster. In the summer of 1941, African American leaders brought home to President Roosevelt the need to include black Americans in the war effort. This meant jobs in the war production plants. In the face of a possible embarrassing strike by thousands of African Americans, Roosevelt issued Executive Order 8802. This decree banned discrimination in defense industries or the government and also created the enforcement agency of the Federal Employment Practice Committee (FEPC).¹²

Many white Americans, and not just in the South, did not want to work or cohabitate with African American coworkers. Detroit automakers retooled their auto plants to make war machinery like fighter-bomber aircraft. On a hot Sunday in June 1943, black and white coworkers from the Ford Willow Run bomber plant took their families to a Detroit amusement park. Battles broke out between black and white patrons that soon engulfed thousands of people. By the time officials restored, thirty-four people

¹¹ Allida M. Black, “A Reluctant But Persistent Warrior: Eleanor Roosevelt and the Early Civil Rights Movement” in Vicki L. Crawford, Jacqueline Ann Rouse, and Barbara Wood, eds., *Women in the Civil Rights Movement: Trailblazers and Torchbearers 1941-1965* (Bloomington, Indiana: Indiana University Press, 1990), 233.

¹² Andrew E. Kernsten, “Federal Employment Practice Committee” in Erik Arnesen, ed., *Encyclopedia of U.S. Labor and Working Class History, Volume 1 A-F*, (New York: Taylor and Frances Group, 2007), 427, article on 427-430.

lost their lives, twenty-five of which were African Americans. Over nine hundred people sustained injuries.¹³

Against this backdrop, Brannon gave a clear summation of her views on the place of African Americans in America, and especially in the South. She stated that the days of the Detroit riots made it clear “that we have a racial problem” and that both white and black leaders needed to work together to find an intelligent solution. What solution did Brannon offer? She opined that the separation of the races stood as the simplest answer. She presented the case that her readers expected. First, each race had to know its place, and that the South needed no help in dealing with the racial situation. She wrote, “The white man and the black man have dwelt together in peace and harmony in the South for many, many years, because each has known his place and kept it.” She argued that each group possessed their own ideas, customs, and habits. Each had their own way of thinking and living, and basically, no conflict existed “as some of our meddling friends would have us believe.” Second, God created the races different so each had to work to keep its integrity by not intermingling. She stated, “The good negro (no capitalization) is just as proud of his race and its integrity as the white man, the Indian, or the Chinese.” Brannon stressed that African Americans in Mississippi refused to be fooled “by loose talk concerning ‘social equality.’” She argued that even among white men, some had greater gifts and achieve more than their peers. Third, she believed that black southerners knew that they could count on the white man as “his friend.” Fourth, African Americans

¹³Douglas Brinkley, ed., *World War II The Allied Counter Offensive, 1942-1945: The Documents, Speeches, Diaries, and Newspaper Reporting That Defined World War II* (New York: New York Times Company, 2003), 111.

lagged behind whites in achievements; thus they needed to be proud of their progress but not push too hard. She stated,

The wise leaders of the negro race know they have advanced further in the shortest length of time than any other race in the history of civilization. From the time the rich Yankee peddlers brought them over in their boats from Africa and sold them into slavery to the southern planters they have steadily advanced with the march of progress and time. The progress of the negro in the south has been as rapid as he has been able to assimilate by virtue of his intellect and temperament.¹⁴

That being said, she made it clear that the whites ruled the South and no other view would be tolerated. Pleasantries aside, she made it clear,

But the south and America are white man's country and both races know it. America is a white man's country. We may have taken it away from the Indians, but it is, nevertheless, a white man's country...just as Liberia is a black man's country where no white man is allowed to be a citizen. America is big enough for both races. Especially is the south a white man's country. Here we have ten million of the thirteen million Negroes in the US, the races, of necessity, must come into closer contact with each other than in other sections of the country where only a handful of colored people live.¹⁵

She concluded that the "so called 'negro problem'" had to be addressed by "southern white and negro people." Brannon rejected any solutions proposed "by our northern friends or handed down from Washington." She countered, "We must solve it ourselves because it particularly our own. No amount of legislating in Washington however inspired can change that." She then congratulated white southerners for waking up to the reality that trouble in race relations came from outsiders, especially those in the

¹⁴ *Lexington Advertiser*, 8 July 1943; Like most southern newspapers of the time, Brannon did not capitalize the term Negro in her newspapers.

¹⁵ *Ibid.*, 8 July 1943.

Roosevelt administration. She reminded her readers that many outliers “under the guise of the New Deal” had “made a second carpetbagging expedition into the South.”¹⁶

What was her ultimate solution for improving relations between whites and blacks? Brannon offered some mild answers that she thought in no way would affect the entrenched racial hierarchy. She urged the improvement of black schools in regards to better equipment and better-trained teachers. A more uniform pay scale between black and white agricultural workers needed to be established. Brannon thought that African Americans needed more hospitals and clinics and a greater pool of trained health care workers. Finally, she thought blacks deserved “more courteous treatment in retail establishments.” Brannon’s words rang true for many of her white readers because the demand for the editorial grew so strong that she reprinted the editorial in the July 15, 1943 of the Lexington Advertiser under the title “The South’s Racial Problem.”¹⁷

The re-printing allowed Brannon’s readers to unpack and analyze her ideas and served as a counter balance to testimony of African Americans like Chalmers Archer. First, she appeared to be talking out of both sides of her mouth. She said that a racial problem existed but at the same time that no racial problem existed if both groups knew their place. In her mind, it seemed clear that the problem came from the U.S. government’s attempt through small steps of integration to inflict black inferiority upon the superior group, white Americans. In the mind of most white southerners, the government fostered this same kind of racial experimentation during Reconstruction, the decade after the Civil War. The Radical Republicans pushed the thirteenth, fourteenth,

¹⁶ Ibid., 8 July 1943.

¹⁷ Ibid., 8, 15 July 1943.

and fifteenth amendments to the Constitution that abolished slavery, made black Americans citizenship, and gave black men the vote. White southerners rejected that attempt then, and Brannon believed that her peers rejected Franklin Roosevelt's attempt in 1943. To Brannon and most of white her peers, racial segregation stood as certain as gravity and the light of the moon. No other way existed.¹⁸

Chalmers Archer's life and experiences rejected Brannon's views on race relations in Holmes County in 1943. In his mind, life for African Americans in Mississippi differed little from the antebellum slave days. Archer recounted in his memoir a story his grandfather Payton told about his days in slavery in Holmes County. Archer's grandfather said that one day his master summoned him and took the young black man into the woods behind the slave quarters. "Without preamble" the master "whipped him unmercifully." When young Payton asked why the master beat him, the master replied that he beat Payton to teach him a lesson. The master wanted Payton to understand "who was boss on the plantation and what would happen to him if he did anything the plantation owner disapproved of. End of lesson." Chalmers Archer concluded that his own era in Holmes County differed little from that of his grandfather's. For Archer, Holmes County of the 1940s existed as a place where black "children and teenagers in Lexington were often held in city jail for no reason other than

¹⁸ See Eric Foner, *Reconstruction: America's Unfinished Revolution 1863-1877* (New York: Harper, 2002); Generations of white southerners following the post war decade imbibed the teaching that the Reconstruction was a period where white northerners and freedmen joined in a treacherous and corrupt cabal to exploit and take over the South. Groups like the Ku Klux Klan arose to rescue or redeem the South and reinstitute white supremacy; See Gary Gallagher and Alan T. Nolan, *The Myth of the Lost Cause and Civil War History* (Bloomington, Indiana: Illinois University Press, 2010); Charles Reagan Wilson, *Baptized in Blood: The Religion of the Lost Cause 1865-1920* (Athens, Ga.: University of Georgia Press, 2009); Gaines M. Foster, *Ghosts of the Confederacy: Defeat, the Lost Cause, and the Emergence of the New South 1865-1913* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1998).

to be ‘taught lessons.’” Whether in police custody or not, African Americans who breeched the standard of proper racial etiquette endured painful reminders to fall back in line. Decades after he left Holmes County, Archer recounted that he could “personally still feel the splitting pain inflicted by the police only because I did not get off the sidewalk while passing a white woman.”¹⁹

If Archer knew of Brannon’s assertions, he certainly rejected them. Brannon made clear that she thought that African Americans lagged behind white Mississippians in intellect, drive, and moral capabilities. In his autobiography, Archer countered these sentiments. He noted that while growing up in Holmes County “self-sufficiency was the order of the day for everything but education.” African Americans like the Archers made the most of their meager possessions. His family grew their own vegetables. They consumed some and sold the rest. The Archer men hunted to supplement their diet. Archer’s family scoured the forests for herbs for cooking and medicinal purposes. In Archer’s opinion, limitations that African Americans in Mississippi faced were not due to supposed deficiencies in intellect, drive, or work habits. Instead, the blame lay at the feet of southern whites and their dedication to the oppressive system of Jim Crow.²⁰

Archer stressed that white southerners imposed these limitations on African Americans, and then condemned African Americans who lived in poverty and ignorance. Reflecting on his childhood in Holmes County, he wrote that most white planters restricted African Americans to plantation life. This meant constant toil and poverty.

¹⁹ Chalmers Archer, Jr., *Growing Up Black in Rural Mississippi*, 16, 125

²⁰ *Lexington Advertiser*, 8 July 1943; Chalmers Archer, Jr., *Growing Up Black in Rural Mississippi*, 12, 21, 51.

Resistance, for most, proved futile. Why? It was because “Plantation owners resorted to coercions, constraints, pressures, and violence which was often supported by law.”²¹

To make matters worse, Archer pointed out that white southerners like Brannon really believed that African Americans considered themselves happy and content under the aegis of Jim Crow. To Archer’s amazement, white southerners expected African Americans to confirm their contentment and warmly accept their white neighbors. The frustration of this life seared Archer. In a heart wrenching point in his book, he uttered the cry that represented the thoughts and sentiments of most African Americans in the South during the Jim Crow era. He wrote,

Strange as it may see, whites badly wanted black people’s acceptance. White people wanted us to assure them that everything was fine with us. You are alive and happy!’ we heard them say often. Yes, we were alive. Safe and secure? No. Content? No. As human beings we did not lose hope of someday being able to just visit the public library of our choice. Or any library at all for that matter. We desperately wanted to just feel safe from abuse when we walked down the street. To be able to look in a shop window, or just watch the sunset without worry about physical harm. To have entitlements the same as other people. To have the same opportunities as other races whose kids were born with an edge so comprehensive as to constitute unlimited entitlement.²²

Whatever gods there may be, Archer and his black contemporaries in 1940s Holmes County wanted to know what they had done to deserve such a life. He concluded with this question, “Why did we have to live in a place where black people were forever in fear of the rest of society.”²³

A white contemporary of Brannon also questioned her assumptions, first in his own life, then in his professional career as a journalist. A native Texan, Ira Harkey

²¹ Ibid., 63.

²² Ibid., 127-128.

²³ Ibid., 128.

served in the Navy in the Pacific Theatre during World War II. In 1949, he entered the journalistic field and bought the Mississippi Gulf Coast paper, the Pascagoula *Chronicle-Star*. He stood as one of a handful of white journalists in the 1950s and early 1960s that challenged Mississippi to reject racial extremism and embrace African American advances towards civil rights.²⁴

What led young Harkey to this enlightened view that contrasted with the views of peers like Brannon? In his autobiography, Harkey said that his mother never let him use the epithet Nigger while he was growing up. She also taught him the Jeffersonian ideal that all men were created equal. Harkey's war experiences traumatized him but also forever shaped his views on the interaction of the races. What he saw on January 22, 1945 changed his life. On that day, Harkey served as a junior officer on the aircraft carrier, the U.S.S. Hancock. A torpedo plane accidentally dropped its 500-pound bomb while trying to land on the ship's flat top. The explosion killed fifty-two sailors. Harkey said the blood seemed ankle deep. The next day, January 23, the pallbearers placed all fifty-two bodies in white canvas shrouds and dropped them one by one over the side into the Pacific. Harkey noted that the dead included white, Filipino, and African American sailors. Reflecting on this horror, he asked himself, "What had color or physical characteristics mattered? Had not all feared death, had not all felt pain with the ripping of fire and steel?" He concluded,

As I watched the blur of canvas sacks slip over the side the conviction came to me that the Negro, who is good enough to be gutted by an

²⁴ Ira B. Harkey, Jr. *The Smell of Burning Crosses: An Autobiography of a Mississippi Newspaperman*. Jacksonville, Illinois: Harris-Wolfe and Col, 1967; David L. Bennett, "Ira B. Harkey, Jr., and the Pascagoula Chronicle" in David L. Davis, ed., *The Press and Race: Mississippi Journalists Confront the Movement* (Jackson, Mississippi: University Press of Mississippi, 2001), 173-208.

unsegregated explosion, to be trussed in an unsegregated sack, to be dumped into an unsegregated ocean and dispatched to an unsegregated heaven or hell, is just exactly good enough to live an unsegregated life in the country of his birth. And I thought further that the southern Negro in his century of un-emancipated emancipation, has shown himself through his infinite patience and incredible loyalty to be the best American there is. And I feel grateful to him. And I still do. I have an inexpressible feeling about the value of the Negro as a symbol of Americanism and about the lesson of patriotism his wretched life can teach all others of us less qualified to call ourselves American.²⁵

As a Mississippi editor, starting in 1949, Harkey took the unprecedented step of removing the word Negro to single out individuals in a story unless the article called for a physical description. Once, Harkey wrote an article about three youths killed in separate accidents in Pascagoula. Harkey did not mention that one of the young men happened to be African American. A Pascagoula lawyer berated Harkey for this transgression and said, “If you have to write about niggers, call ‘em [sic] niggers right up at top so I don’t waste time reading about ‘em.” Harkey refused to listen and continued this policy. In 1951, he defended his policy before the Mississippi Press Association. He received further chastisement from many editors including Hazel Brannon. One editor said, “People want to know when a man’s a nigger or not!” Harkey’s editorial policies toward African Americans provided a counterpoint to the views of Hazel Brannon and other white editors.²⁶

While Harkey stood out as an anomaly, Brannon followed suit with other white editors in Mississippi and consistently defended white supremacy against the policies of journalists like Harkey, but also of Roosevelt and Truman as well. In the spring of 1944, Brannon recoiled at the thought of a fourth term of Roosevelt. She wrote “four more

²⁵ Ira B. Harkey, Jr., *The Smell of Burning Crosses*, 205-206.

²⁶ *Ibid.*, 65, 80.

years of the Roosevelt's in the White House will mean a death blow to every tradition held dear to southern hearts and suicide for the Democratic Party." She prophesied that revolution would sweep the nation if FDR stayed in power for another term. In 1944, she charged that the Franklin and Eleanor Roosevelt stood for "social and political equality of the races." Brannon expressed shock that Eleanor Roosevelt had attended a party thrown by the Congress of Industrial Organizations (CIO) where black men and white girls danced together and sang "Let Me Call You Sweetheart." That provoked Brannon to remind her readers of what she considered God's unbreakable law, the separation of the races. She wrote,

The God who created us all never intended that blacks and whites should mingle together socially, sexually, intermingle or intermarry... We have the higher type of Negroes in the South who take pride in the color of their race who have their own code of morals and who no more think of marrying a white person than they would think about flying.²⁷

Brannon reminded her readers that African Americans had made progress and benefited from "white man's civilization." According to her, black Americans "had come a long way in a few generations from slavery and savagery" and that "the best leaders of the negro race" understood this and agreed "that the progress made by their race has been more than satisfactory to date." Again she concluded that the South was more than capable of solving its own problems.²⁸

Brannon believed that the Roosevelt administration and the Supreme Court meddled in affairs that came under the state sovereignty. An example came with the 1944 decision, *Smith v. Alwright*, which ruled the southern white Democratic primary

²⁷ *Lexington Advertiser*, 13 April 1944.

²⁸ *Ibid.*, 13 April 1944.

(excluding blacks from voting) unconstitutional. This case served as one of many precedents that eventually led to the *Brown* decision in 1954 that declared legal segregation as unconstitutional. Brannon charged that Roosevelt had packed the Supreme Court with his sycophants and thus, the South should not have been surprised at the decision. She said it was one more reason FDR needed to go.²⁹

In the aftermath of the *Smith v. Alright* decision, Brannon attacked some Mississippi politicians who had not condemned the decision. She charged that southern whites who were angry planned to leave the Democratic Party en masse “unless it is purged of every vestige of the New Deal.” She charged that the Democratic Party had abandoned the South. She reminded her readers that the South allied with the Democratic Party because of its belief in a low tariff and its “white supremacy principles.” Brannon banged the alarmist drum and declared that Roosevelt geared his policies toward a “New Order” resulting in America sliding down a slope toward totalitarianism “along the same lines as Hitler, Mussolini, and Stalin.” She warned her readers that if Congress did not stop FDR, then he would lead the country down the road to integration. She concluded, “If the people of the South have no better sense than to let this situation which threatens their destruction to continue then they deserved to be destroyed.” Brannon’s columns mirrored the sentiments of most of her readers, i.e., that submission to FDR’s policies spelled the onslaught of nightmarish outcomes. Thus, as Jason Morgan Ward pointed out, many white southerners, whether at the federal, state, or local level, did throw up road blocks against the possibility of the dismantling of Jim

²⁹ Ibid. 13 April 1944; For a brief exposition on civil rights cases of the 1930s and 1940s, see Numan V. Bartley, *The Rise of Massive Resistance: Race and Politics in the South During the 1950's* (Baton Rouge, La.: Louisiana State University Press, 1969, 1997), 1-9.

Crow long before 1954. And after the *Brown* decision of 1954, white southerners in many states took an even more reactionary path. The amazing thing is that Brannon refused to travel down that reactionary road that she believed would occur, much to the shock and anger of her readers.³⁰

From her editorials in the mid-1940s, it is clear that Hazel Brannon considered herself as one of the elite and a spokesperson for the county's interests. Yet, she could still be as reactionary and overtly racist as Mississippi's worst demagogue, U.S. Senator Theodore G. Bilbo. In July 1945, Bilbo and James Eastland, the Junior Senator from Mississippi, waged a three day filibuster against legislation that proposed to make the Fair Employment Practices Commission (FEPC) permanent. The original aim of the FEPC was to institute a non-discriminatory employment policy in U.S. defense industries during the war so that the most qualified person would get the job regardless of race or creed. Bilbo and Eastland wanted the FEPC abolished. Standing before the Senate, Bilbo bellowed, "If you go through the government departments there are so many niggers it's like a black cloud all around you." Bilbo blamed blacks, Jews, and Catholics for joining in a conspiracy to bring about racial equality. And he concluded that the proposal to make the commission permanent "was a damnable, Communist, poisonous piece of legislation." When Bilbo tired, Eastland took his place. *Time* magazine derided Eastland as being able "to coon-shout with the best of them." Eastland denounced the commission based on the idea that it was trying to elevate "an inferior race." Eastland claimed, "Negro soldiers have caused the U.S.A. to lose prestige all over Europe." He claimed that blacks would not work or fight and were "guilty of half the crimes in the

³⁰ Ibid., 20 April 1944; Jason Morgan Ward, *Defending White Democracy*, 1-4.

Army.” Bilbo and Eastland raised such uproar that the House withdrew the Bill. Brannon commented about Bilbo’s diatribe and said, “it is humiliating to be forced to adopt the strategy Sen. Bilbo has employed to kill the FEPC, but necessary.” She claimed that the FEPC legislation was “anti-southern in nature” and hated by many. Thus, while she may have considered herself more refined in tone and expression, she shared the same base sentiments.³¹

With the death of Franklin Delano Roosevelt on April 12, 1945, many in the South hoped that the federal government’s flirting with greater civil rights for African Americans would end. To the horror of Hazel Brannon and many others in Mississippi and the Deep South, President Harry S. Truman took further steps to mitigate the plight of African Americans. In December 1946, Truman created the President’s Committee on Civil Rights (PCCR). The goal of the committee was to find ways that local, state, and federal governments could insure “the personal freedoms embodied in the Constitution.” On June 29, 1947, President Truman stood in front of the Lincoln Memorial in Washington D.C. and gave an address to a rally sponsored the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP). Broadcast live across the country by radio, Truman promised “that the federal government would be a friendly, vigilant defender of the rights and equalities of all Americans. And...I mean all Americans.” In language that astounded Brannon and other white southerners, Truman denounced the reality that many Americans (meaning African Americans) still lived under injustice, intimidation, and the constant reality of mob violence. Truman urged, “We cannot wait

³¹ Theodore Bilbo and James Eastland quoted in “Rule By Demagogues,” *Time*, 9 July 1945; *Lexington Advertiser*, 28 June 1945. Background on Bilbo’s filibuster, Terry H. Anderson, *The Pursuit of Fairness: A History of Affirmative Action* (New York: Oxford University Press), 35-36.

another decade or another generation to remedy these evils. We must work, as never before, to cure them now.”³²

In the fall of 1947, The PCCR issued its report, *To Secure These Rights*, and concluded that a great chasm existed between the American notion of equality and the reality faced by African Americans. The PCCR made several recommendations in the report. The commission called for enlarging the civil rights division of the Justice Department, creating a perpetual civil rights commission, passing an anti-lynching statute, banning the poll tax, and abolishing discrimination in the private sector. If these suggestions were not enough to shock the South, the report called for withholding federal funds from any program that continued to employ Jim Crow tactics. Truman heartily agreed with the conclusions of the PCCR.³³

Truman’s commitment to expanding the civil rights of African Americans angered white southerners including Hazel Brannon. In January 1948, Fielding Wright took over as the Governor of Mississippi. In his inauguration speech, he condemned Truman and the national Democratic Party moving toward adopting an expanded civil rights program. Brannon commended Wright in her column. She agreed with the Governor in his statement that Mississippi Democrats refused to stand “for continued violations of southern standards.” Brannon stressed “the people of Mississippi are tired of being slandered and slapped in the face by what passes now for the Democratic Party.” She believed Mississippi Democrats would reject Truman and the Democratic Party if they continued pushing the implementations recommended by the PCCR. She argued

³² William Edward Leuchtenburg. *The White House Looks South: Franklin D. Roosevelt, Harry S. Truman, Lyndon B. Johnson* (Baton Rouge, La.: LSU Press, 2005), 165, 171.

³³ *Ibid.*, 172.

that if Congress passed an anti-lynching law, abolished the poll tax, and even mentioned ending segregation in public places, then Mississippians had no choice but to abandon the Democratic Party. Even worse, the repercussions of this wrongheaded strategy could only lead to “ill will, possible violence and bloodshed.”³⁴

Brannon continued her attack on Truman’s civil rights program throughout February of 1948. In her February 5 column, she listed all the points of Truman’s plan and called for the South to withhold its electors from the Democratic Party in order to bring concessions in the 1948 presidential election. Countering the charge that Mississippi was abandoning the Democratic Party, Brannon bellowed, “We are not bolting the Democratic party in Mississippi. It has long since bolted us.” A week later she commented on a meeting of southern governors. She dubbed eight of the southern governors who refused to criticize Truman’s civil rights program as “political cowards.” She commended Governor Fielding Wright and said he stood up at the governor’s meeting “like a man” and refused to go along with “anti-southern” legislation. In her February 19 column, Brannon approved of Wright’s call for the state Democrats to abandon the national Democratic Party. Brannon then went and charged Truman’s civil rights program was not only “anti-southern” but also “should be regarded as an un-American attack on constitutional government in this country. Our government is founded upon the Constitution which gives the states sovereignty over our elections and local government.” Like southerners all the way back to the tariff crisis between President Andrew Jackson and South Carolina in the early 1830s, Brannon believed in states’ rights. She argued that if Truman used federal force to oversee local elections

³⁴ *Lexington Advertiser*, 22 January 1948.

then state sovereignty no longer existed and “the federal government would become a monster, overseeing all.” She saw Truman’s actions as a blow against the very foundation of the American political heritage.³⁵

Though she used bellicose language in the defense of Jim Crow that did not mean Brannon denounced improving conditions for African Americans. While the editor denounced Truman’s civil rights program, she simultaneously favored the South improving the educational, health, and living standards of blacks. She said if this happened, then whites would benefit as well. In her February 5, 1948 column, Brannon said that “any fair-minded southerner” would agree that the South needed more black male and female professionals. This would only take place if there were more professional school to cater to African Americans. She surmised, “We know we cannot reasonably expect Mississippi to be a rich and powerful state and take advantage of all its resources to the fullest extent when one-half of its population is negro and that half of the population is comparatively poorly educated, fed, clothed, and housed.” Yet, in a March 1948 column, she noted that while the South needed to improve the conditions for African Americans, the South did not need federal intervention. In Brannon’s opinion, the federal government had no business trying to implement social equality. Thus, she commented, if Truman and well-meaning northerners really “had the real interest of our negro friends at heart they’d know and proclaim that the progress we are making in the south is just about as fast as can be assimilated by our colored friends.” Once again, Brannon’s paternalism shined through. Southern whites knew what black southerners needed. It did not occur to her that most African Americans in Mississippi suffered from

³⁵ *Lexington Advertiser*, 5, 12, 19 February 1948.

a lack of education, poor economic conditions, and poor healthcare because of an inherently unequal and undemocratic system imposed by their white neighbors.³⁶

With southern states balking at the threat of federal intervention in racial affairs, Brannon lauded the formation of the Dixiecrat Party in the summer of 1948. Mississippi politicians joined other southern Democrats in their rejection of Truman's reelection campaign. Instead, many called themselves Dixiecrats and ran on a plank of states' rights and the preservation of segregation. Dixiecrats nominated South Carolina Governor Strom Thurmond for president with Mississippi Governor Fielding Wright as his running mate. Though the Dixiecrats failed to pull enough electoral votes from Truman and bring his defeat, they did take the states of Mississippi, Alabama, Louisiana, and South Carolina and won thirty nine electoral votes. Throughout Truman's second term as president, Hazel Brannon and most of white Mississippi remained defiant.³⁷

Well into 1949, Brannon still attacked Truman's civil rights advocacy and touted the segregation and states' rights principles of the Dixiecrats. Before embarking on a cruise in the Caribbean and around South America (and meeting her future husband Walter Smith), Brannon again chastised Truman. She wrote, "Mr. Truman is doing the country a grave disservice by trying to cram the Civil Rights program down the throats of an unwilling Congress." She noted that Franklin Roosevelt only talked about civil rights, but Truman actually took steps to bring them about. Brannon believed Truman felt pressure from "highly organized minorities." In a column in the fall of 1949, Brannon rejected criticism of the Dixiecrat agenda from 1948. She argued that the Dixiecrats

³⁶ *Lexington Advertiser*, 5 February, 4 March 1948.

³⁷ See Kari Frederickson, *The Dixiecrat Revolt and the End of the Solid South* (Chapel Hill, NC: University of North Carolina Press, 2001).

stood for principles that almost all white southerners held dear, those of “constitutional government and upholding the sovereign rights of states.” The editor boasted, “We are proud to be included in the group.” She remained firm in her belief that Truman was leading the country down the road to perdition. She argued that Truman’s determination to press civil rights spelled the doom of constitutional government the United States.³⁸

While during the 1940s and early 1950s as Brannon attacked the federal government for its mild attempts to ameliorate the unequal conditions that African Americans faced, she also wrote many positive stories on local African American in Holmes County. Historians like Paul Gaston and Jason Sokol describe this practice as putting forth the “happy Negro” idea. As many historians have pointed out, the concept of the “happy Negro” traced its origin back to the antebellum days when white southerners put forth a defense of slavery against anti-slavery propaganda. According to this myth, slavery stood as a beneficial institution where carefree slaves depended on the benevolence of their caring white masters. This mantra evolved after the Civil War and stated that white and black southerners got along in the New South. African Americans in the South knew their place and accepted white leadership. Southern whites thought that they alone truly understood and cared for their black compatriots and needed no outside interference. If a disruption in the racial hierarchy arose, it all stemmed from outside northern interference. Obviously African American dissent did not fit in this narrative and was never included in this tale. As renowned southern historian C. Vann Woodward put it, until 1960 and the emergence of the civil rights movement, white southerners had convinced themselves that “southern Negroes were contented with the

³⁸ *Lexington Advertiser*, 17 March, 15 September 1949.

‘southern way of life,’ that they preferred segregation, and that left to themselves they would never think of protesting.” In a 1963 NAACP article on conditions in the South, the organization described this kind of thinking prevalent among southern whites. The article noted:

A Negro has his secrets. He has had to ‘accommodate’ or else suffer reprisals. He has had to climb his mountain of yes-yes-yes and grin at the white man. He has seen the perpetuation of the southern myths that say he is happy, carefree, contented with his life as southern whites have arranged it for him. He knows that these myths are a great lie which white men have had to invent in order to live with their consciences.³⁹

Chalmers Archer noted that whites in Holmes County expected African Americans to express these same attitudes in the 1940s. He wrote, “White people wanted us to assure them that everything was fine. ‘You are alive and happy!’ we heard them say often.”⁴⁰

Between 1943 and 1953, Hazel Brannon Smith wrote several stories in the vein of local black farmers achieving under the benevolent and mutually edifying system of segregation. During World War II, Brannon highlighted the efforts of a farmer named Gus Courts. Courts lived in Pickens, a community seventeen miles south of Lexington. He brought Brannon “a basket of nice looking turnips from his victory garden.” She wrote that Courts served as an example of “what a good colored farmer can do.” She noted that he had managed to gain an eighth grade education and owned a 96-acre farm.

³⁹ For background on the “happy Negro” myth see John Egerton, *Speak Now Against the Day: The Generation Before the Civil Rights Movement* (New York: Knopf, 1994), 275-276; Paul Gaston “The New South Creed: A Study in Southern Myth Making” in Patrick Gerstner and Nicholas Cords, eds. *Myth and Southern History: Volume 2*, The New South (USA, Illini Books, 1989), 28 (article 17-34); Jason Sokol, *There Goes My Everything: White Southerners in the Age of Civil Rights, 1945-1975* (New York: Knopf, 2006), 56-57; C. Vann Woodward, *The Strange Career of Jim Crow* (New York: Oxford Univ. Press, 1955, 2002), 168-169; No Author, “Looking and Listening,” *The Crisis* (May 1963), 285. (article 284-287)

⁴⁰ Chalmers Archer, Jr., *Growing Up Black in Rural Mississippi*, 127.

For Brannon, the black farmer represented “what hard work and thrift can accomplish for a colored man and his family on a southern farm.” She pointed out that Courts had a son in the Army in England and a seven-year-old daughter at home. Courts and his wife, Mary, ran a self-sufficient farm. He raised seven bales of cotton in 1943. He owned and raised his own work animals. Courts owned four hundred chickens, five milk cows, and he slaughtered five hogs every winter. Courts’ wife canned a variety of vegetables and fruits. Brannon pointed out Courts “didn’t need to borrow a cent for the year” and concluded that the Courts’ family had “everything they need and want to eat at home for Mary has done lots of canning and preserving.” For Brannon, Courts served as an example of how Jim Crow worked for a black man who was hard-working and responsible. It never occurred to her to question Courts about his perspective on living in Jim Crow Holmes County, and Courts had the good sense to hide his true thoughts anyway. Faced with inequality, Courts used silence and self-sufficiency as his survival mechanisms.⁴¹

During the 1940s, Brannon ran a column in the back pages of the paper called “With Our Colored Friends in Holmes County.” There she printed news about African Americans of note in the county. An August 3, 1944 article on John Reedy from Durant served as an example. Before entering the Army, Reedy worked as a carpenter for the Durant Construction Company. In the service, Reedy served as an Army unit carpenter in the South Pacific. Brannon demonstrated the contradictory nature of Jim Crow in her

⁴¹ “Gus Courts Shows What a Good Colored Farmer Can Do,” *Lexington Advertiser*, 20 January 1944; Brannon wrote other articles about skilled African American farmers who had success. In the 1 February 1951 edition of the *Advertiser*, she printed a front page article on black farms that won cash awards in the Best Colored Corn contest. In the 5 November 1953 edition, she highlighted black farmer Howard Bailey and noted how he was using scientific farming.

reporting. She could argue that African Americans lagged behind their white neighbors in skill and intelligence and thus did not deserve equality, but at the same time she reported of African American hard work, initiative, and achievement. Later experiences forced her to re-evaluate the former argument.⁴²

In December 1946, Brannon ran several stories on the tragedy of an African American man named Holsey Smith. Smith had lost both of his legs earlier in his life, but in 1946, he also lost two of his children when his house burned down. Brannon pointed out that many whites came to Holsey Smith's rescue, raising \$500. By the end of December, she reported that over \$900 had been raised, almost \$400 of it from the black community. Black and white residents of the county donated lumber, clothes, and other necessities to help out. Obviously, Brannon felt a genuine concern for Smith's plight, but it served as an opportunity to remind her readers that she thought this was the true nature of black-white relations in Holmes County. On the front page, she printed a full list of all the white contributors as well as the amount each gave. She offered that a complete list of black contributors would be given later, although she did not publish the black list on the front page when it appeared. Brannon concluded that while the world was full of hatred and greed, in communities like Lexington "good will and real friendship" still remained. She reminded her readers that this kind of friendship had blossomed many times over the years.⁴³

This "good will and real friendship" did not mean blacks and whites stood on equal footing in the county. Three glaring examples stand out in regards to Brannon's

⁴² "With Our Colored Friends in Holmes County," *Lexington Advertiser*, 3 August 1944.

⁴³ *Lexington Advertiser*, 12, 19, 26 December 1946.

newspaper. First, she did not capitalize the word Negro when referring to blacks in the news. Also, Brannon, like most southern editors, did not use courtesy titles when referring to African Americans. Every week, Brannon printed a list of people who were patients in the Holmes County Hospital. She broke the list up into “white” patients and “colored” patients. Brannon always referred to white married women with a courtesy title and their husband’s name. For example, if John Doe’s wife stayed in the hospital, Brannon listed the woman as “Mrs. John Doe.” On the other hand, Brannon always listed married African American females by their first names, and left off the courtesy titles. Thus, if Clara Brown was married to John Brown, she was listed on the hospital list as Clara Brown, not Mrs. John Brown. Brannon did not capitalize Negro in her newspaper until the 1950s and did not use courtesy titles for African Americans on hospital lists until the early 1960s. Finally, Brannon, like most southern editors, ran advertisements from companies that used racial stereotypes to sell their products. Throughout the early 1950s, Brannon ran an advertisement for the Chilean Nitrate Company. Chilean Nitrate was a nitrogen-based fertilizer. The illustration contained a picture of an old black man, an Uncle Remus type character, who smiled and said that the Chilean Nitrate was the best kind of fertilizer. In what was considered Negro dialect, the character promised, “Dat show is de natchel kind.” In another advertisement, the black man urged patrons to, “look fo de bulldog on de bag.” In myriads of ways, whether through overt commentary, limiting social respect to white hospital patients, or promoting products that perpetuated racial stereotypes from the glories of a romanticized past, Brannon made it clear that a racial hierarchy existed, and that it was the settled nature of the universe. The idea that

she might later question these views later and advance into new ways of thinking seemed highly unlikely at mid-century.⁴⁴

While Hazel Brannon did not support social and political equality for African Americans previous to 1954, she did have good relations with some of the county's black elite. In November 1950, Brannon published a page two article in praise of local black educator Dr. Arenia C. Mallory. The article celebrated the twenty-fifth anniversary of Mallory's founding and running the Saints Industrial and Literary School in Lexington. Mallory was one of the leading spokespersons for the African American community in Holmes County. In the article, Brannon included a picture of Mallory, a rarity since black faces almost never appeared her newspapers in the 1940s and 1950s. Brannon and Mallory had a genuine friendship because Mallory would come to the editor's aid in the turbulent 1960s.⁴⁵

Like she did with bootlegging, Brannon thought a newspaper should report all the news. This included white on black violence. Though she did not advocate greater civil rights for African Americans between 1943 and 1953, she commented on violence committed against African Americans and even made mild criticisms of Jim Crow segregation as it related to judicial inequality. In the 1940s, her mild disapproval did not bring backlash from the white establishment since Jim Crow appeared to be under no immediate threat. Only after the shockwave created by the 1954 *Brown* decision shook

⁴⁴ *Lexington Advertiser*, 19 February 1953. See M. M. Manring, *Slave in a Box: The Strange Life of Aunt Jemimah* (Charlottesville, Va.: University of Virginia Press, 1998) for a look at slave stereotypes used in American advertising.

⁴⁵ *Lexington Advertiser*, 23 November 1950.

white southerners to the core did Brannon come under attack for presuming to question the extremes taken by white Mississippians to protect Jim Crow.⁴⁶

White Mississippians did not, however, wait on the *Brown* decision to prompt them to retaliate against any perceived threat to the racial status quo. As Jason Morgan Ward pointed out, that long before 1954, white southern politicians who fought against the components of FDR's New Deal that hinted at greater openness for African Americans and Truman's policies that specifically sought to bring more civil rights. On the local level, white southerners employed violence and intimidation toward any African American who sought to push open the envelope of racial conformity.⁴⁷

This was especially true in the first year after World War II. Neil R. McMillen pointed out that black soldiers faced violence and lynchings after returning home after World War I. These veterans hoped to find greater civil rights but were rebuffed. For African Americans who returned to the South after World War II, the backlash proved even worse. The National Association for the Advancement of Colored (NAACP) people put forth what they called the Double V campaign during the War. They wanted African Americans to join the U.S. effort to achieve victory against the fascism of Germany and Japan overseas. The NAACP said the service overseas would help achieve a second victory over Jim Crow racism at home.⁴⁸

⁴⁶ David R. Davies, "Introduction" in David R. Davies, ed., *The Press and Race: Mississippi Journalists Confront the Movement*, 12, pointed out that after 1954 and *Brown*, most white Mississippians held little tolerance for journalists who asked critical questions about Jim Crow and its maintenance. Davies wrote that any journalist who had the temerity "to question the basic tenets of the closed society was to fall out of step with the guiding principles of their southern upbringing and the mores of their community."

⁴⁷ Jason Morgan Ward, *Defending White Democracy*, 1-4.

⁴⁸ Neil R. McMillen, *Dark Journey: Black Mississippians in the Age of Jim Crow*, 302-306; Thomas V. Ward, "Double V Campaign," in Nikki L.M. Brown and Barry M. Stentiford, *The Jim Crow*

Medgar Evers, a black veteran from Mississippi, came home from the war back to the south Mississippi town of Decatur and joined his brother Charles and other veterans and attempted to register in July 1946. The black veterans encountered a group of armed white men. Angry, Evers and the others went and got their guns. They hid their weapons in their vehicles and attempted to enter the courthouse a second time. The white crowd turned them away a second time. From that point on however, Evers determined to work for black civil rights and served throughout the 1950s and the early 1960s as the Mississippi Field Secretary for the NAACP. Many other black veterans came home in 1946 with a determination to change things, and met white intimidation, violence, and deadly resistance.⁴⁹

Historian Jason Sokol called 1946 “a year of reaction” and noted that white southerners from all walks of life employed different strategies to thwart civil rights gains by African Americans. Georgians reelected the virulent racist firebrand Eugene Tallmadge as Governor. Mississippi sent racial demagogue Theodore G. Bilbo back to the U.S. Senate. Both men promised prospective voters that if elected, they guaranteed that African Americans would not vote. On the local scene, white sheriffs and mobs beat and killed many black veterans who attempted to vote.⁵⁰

The NAACP magazine, *The Crisis*, kept a running tab on the kinds of violence returning black veterans faced. In its September 1946 edition, the tabloid told the story of

Encyclopedia: Greenwood Milestones in African American History (Greenwood, Conn.: Greenwood Press, 2008), 247-249.

⁴⁹ See John Ditter, *Local People: The Struggle for Civil Rights in Mississippi* (Urbana, Illinois: University of Illinois Press, 1995), 1-2; Among many biographies of Evers, the most complete is Michael Vinson Williams, *Medgar Evers: Mississippi Martyr* (Fayetteville, Ark.: Univ. of Arkansas Press, 2011).

⁵⁰ Jason Sokol, *There Goes My Everything*, 27-28.

veterans like Isaac Woodward. A twenty seven year old veteran, Woodward met horrific violence at the hands of the sheriff of Batesburg, South Carolina a mere three hours after being discharged from the Army. At a bus stop in Batesburg, the sheriff arrested Woodward for creating a disturbance. While in custody, the sheriff beat Woodward with a nightstick blinding him in both eyes. Jason Sokol noted in July and August of 1946 alone, 12 black men met their deaths at the hands of white individuals or lynch mobs. White Georgians murdered black veteran Maceo Snipes after he registered to vote in the Taylor County hamlet of Butler. The *Crisis* article mentioned that a white lynch mob killed an African American man from Holmes County, Mississippi named Leon McTatie (or McAtee).⁵¹

McAtee's murder came not because of a desire to vote, but over the supposed theft of a saddle. On August 1, 1946, Brannon reported on the death of McAtee, a thirty-five year old African American male who worked for planter Jeff Dodd, Sr. Dodd's farm was located in West, a community ten miles north of Durant. A saddle came up missing at a farm near the Dodd place. When a saddle disappeared from Dodd's farm, the planter blamed McAtee for the thefts. On July 22, 1946, Sheriff Walter Murtagh arrested McAtee and his stepson, Jerry Haywood, and held them on suspicion of robbery for four days in the county jail in Lexington. Dodd went to the jail and convinced Murtagh that he needed McAtee to help harvest his farm's corn crop. The planter paid a bond of \$15.25. He left the stepson in jail. Dodd, his son, Jeff Jr., and several other white men,

⁵¹ Roy Wilkins, ed., *The Crisis*, Vol. 53, no. 9, (September 1946), 276-277; Jason Sokol, *There Goes My Everything*, 28. The NAACP called the Holmes County Leon McTatie. There is some confusion over the last name. When Brannon wrote about the murder, she consistently used the name McAtee. McAtee will be used throughout this section.

took McAtee back to the farm at West. Secured in a pasture, the men took turns flogging McAtee with a grass rope.⁵²

Unbeknownst to Dodd and the others, McAtee's wife Henrietta went to look for her husband. She hid in a wooded area and spied her husband in the back of a truck with the white men. She later testified in court that she saw her husband, bound and beaten, and looking "half-dead." She said his head hung to one side, his lips were bleeding, and his eyes looked "popish." When Dodd and his gang took McAtee back to the pasture for a second round of beatings, she and her children snuck away and got someone to take them twenty miles south to Goodman. When Mrs. McAtee and her family returned the next day, she found that her husband had disappeared. Two days later on July 24, 1946, a fisherman found McAtee's body floating in a Delta lake near the town of Indianola, nearly sixty miles northwest of Dodd's farm. Henrietta McAtee and two Holmes County deputies positively identified McAtee's remains and subsequently, Sheriff Walter Murtagh arrested Dodd's son and the other co-conspirators. Upon hearing of the other arrests, the elder Dodd voluntarily surrendered to arrest. At the pre-trial hearing, Dodd, his son, and three other men admitted to beating McAtee, but denied murdering him. Each man faced a murder charge. They got out of jail on \$2000 bond and awaited trial that took place in October.⁵³

During the trial, Dodd and the other defendants testified that they assaulted McAtee because they thought he was guilty of several thefts in the community. Dodd

⁵² *Lexington Advertiser*, 1 August 1946; "Awaiting Action," *Time*, 12 August 1946; Greenville *Delta Democrat-Times*, 4 August 1946.

⁵³ "Awaiting Action," *Time*, 12 August 1946; *Lexington Advertiser*, 1, 8 August 1946; Greenville *Delta Democrat-Times* 4 August 1946.

said that he bailed McAtee out of jail in order to force him to reveal the hiding place for all his booty. The Dodds and Dixie Roberts, the owner of a Greenwood Cab Company, led the way. Their accomplices included Private James Roberts who was home on leave from the U.S. Army, and another man named Spencer Ellis. The men marched McAtee around a pasture on Dodd's land in search of several missing saddles. Dodd testified that he, his son, and Dixie Roberts took turns whipping McAtee with a grass rope. Roberts' nephew and Spencer Ellis simply stood by and watched. When McAtee continued to proclaim his innocence, Dodd promised to send McAtee back to jail. According to Dodd, McAtee attacked him, and Dodd struck McAtee four more blows and called for the others to come to his aid. Before they could help, McAtee broke away, jumped over a fence and escaped into the woods. The men said they had no knowledge of McAtee's whereabouts after his escape and did not know how his body ended up in a lake sixty miles away.⁵⁴

Henrietta McAtee bravely contradicted the white men's testimony. She claimed that her husband could not have escaped because he was bound and almost unconscious from a severe beating. Since Henrietta McAtee did not actually witness her husband's murder, the county prosecutor tried the defendants on a reduced charge of manslaughter. Dodd and the other men's lawyer countered by arguing that no basis for a charge of manslaughter existed since the defendants claimed to see McAtee run away. Henrietta McAtee did not receive justice for her husband. Circuit Judge S.F. Davis acquitted the younger Roberts and Ellis before the jury deliberated, and the jury returned a "not guilty"

⁵⁴ Ibid., 24 October 1946.

verdict for the other three after meeting for only four minutes. Later, McAtee's two stepchildren, Jerry L. and Robert Haywood, confessed to stealing the saddles.⁵⁵

Where she would make bold pronouncements against racially inspired violence in the county and the state in the 1950s and 1960s, Brannon shied away from making a conclusion that the five men had gotten away with murder. She noted in her first report of the death of McAtee that medical evidence showed that he was beaten to death. This countered the verdict of the coroner's jury of Leflore County whom rendered a verdict of death from unknown causes. Whereas Brannon denounced Sheriff Walter Murtagh for his lack of enforcement in regards to bootleg liquor, she praised him and the prosecutor for their investigation. Upon the jury's verdict, she concluded, "The great majority of white people regret and deplore the circumstances surrounding the death of a slightly built 35 year old Holmes negro man." She noted that two of the men had admitted to Sheriff Murtagh that they had beaten McAtee but had not killed him. She pointed out that Henrietta McAtee had not actually seen her husband beaten or killed. She then tried to put the best light on the situation and stated,

It is generally conceded that none of the men involved, all reputable men, would deliberately kill anyone. But they did admit whipping which naturally made them suspects when his body was found in a lake in another county.⁵⁶

Whereas she received the lion's share of glory for shedding light on the illegal bootlegging in the county, she glossed over the natural conclusion about the sordid event; the men savagely beat McAtee to death and then got rid of the body. Brannon reasoned that the prosecutor "did not have enough evidence to establish the guilt of

⁵⁵ Ibid., 24 October 1946.

⁵⁶ Ibid., 24 October 1946.

the men.” Concerning Dodd and his co-conspirators, she let them off the hook while mildly hinting that conditions needed to improve. She wrote,

The men involved, we know, regret the negro’s death. Even if they aren’t guilty they still have to live with themselves for the rest of their lives. Perhaps this case will result in more serious consideration being held for the personal rights of all men, white or black. It is a situation demanding deliberate consideration from thinking men and women everywhere.⁵⁷

While the five men escaped judgment, Brannon got in hot water with Judge S.F. Davis during the trial. Brannon had already drawn Davis’s ire in 1946 for her critical editorial comments over his dismissal of the bootlegging situation in the county. In the matter of the McAtee trial, Davis cited Brannon for contempt. During the trial Davis issued a gag order that forbade witnesses from talking to the press. Brannon was not in court when Davis issued this order. While reporting the story for the *Memphis Commercial Appeal*, Brannon interviewed Henrietta McAtee right after she testified. Brannon had arrived late for court and wanted McAtee to repeat her testimony. Upon seeing McAtee talking to Brannon, a sheriff’s deputy came over and berated McAtee for talking. Brannon returned to her office to write up the day’s story for the *Commercial Appeal*. A deputy appeared at her office and summoned her back to court. Not realizing she had angered Davis, she told the deputy that she was on deadline and would return to court when she finished. Upon arrival in court, Davis scolded Brannon for violating his

⁵⁷ Ibid., 24 October 1946. Though her criticisms of racial violence were mild, Brannon did at least report racial violence in her paper as well as some positive stories on black educators and successful farmers. One African American group took note of her work. In 1948, the Mississippi Association of Colored School Teachers awarded Hazel Brannon their certificate of merit for the white person who contributed the most toward improving race relations in the state. The certificate can be found in the Hazel Brannon Papers, Mitchell Memorial Library, Special Collections and Manuscripts, Mississippi State University.

gag order. Brannon apologized and said she did not know that Davis had given such an order.⁵⁸

Stung by Brannon's crusade against bootleg liquor, and her questioning of the legal system on Holmes County, Davis hit Brannon with a \$50 fine and a fifteen-day jail sentence. He then suspended both the fine and the jail sentence and put her on probation for two years "pending good behavior." The magistrate then gave Brannon a lecture on the futility of her efforts. He admitted that she was "putting on a great campaign for law and order," but reminded her that, "if you read history you will see that the only perfect being didn't make much of a hit with His reforms. He reformed a few and left this advice: Before you clean up someone else, clean up yourself." Judge Davis added, "so few pure of us are left." Explaining he had been circuit judge for 27 years, Judge Davis said,

I've been around here a long time and know the job it is to clean up Holmes County. I don't believe you can do it. I am of the opinion that when Gabriel blows his horn and rolls back the scroll of Heaven, he will find the world like it is today. I am sorry that is the situation.⁵⁹

Informing the editor that he derived no pleasure from sentencing her, the judge told Brannon that he wished she "had stayed out of this mess...I admire your spunk but doubt your judgment. You have run head on into this court. When called upon, you proceeded to give the court a curt lecture to his duties." Judge Davis found Brannon guilty as charged. He added that he sympathized with her efforts but in regards to the sentence, "you brought it on yourself."⁶⁰

⁵⁸ Ken Toler, *Memphis Commercial Appeal*, reprinted in *Lexington Advertiser*, 31 October 1946

⁵⁹ *Ibid.*, 31 October 1946.

⁶⁰ *Ibid.*, 31 October 1946.

While the white community soon moved on from Leon McAtee's murder, Brannon's reputation benefited from the contempt citation. Her attorney filed an appeal of her conviction and probation, which she would eventually get overturned in 1947. Major Fred Sullens, the editor of the *Jackson Daily News*, the state's largest newspaper, wrote an editorial praising Brannon and excoriating Judge Davis. Brannon, skilled at self-promotion, reprinted the editorial. Sullens lauded Brannon as a "crusading editor" who was "clever, captivating, and courageous." Sullens charged that Brannon's only crime was interviewing a witness in order to get her facts straight, and "for this enormous offense, a brave, lionhearted young woman who has been waging a splendid fight against the reign of lawlessness in Holmes County is treated like an ordinary criminal." For Sullens, it was monstrous that Davis had treated Brannon in such a fashion, going further and putting the editor on two years' probation. He concluded, "The press of the nation will glory in the spunk of Miss Brannon for her refusal to accept the sentence, and the case will be carried to the Supreme Court." Sullens reminded his readers that Brannon had waged an almost single-handed battle "to stamp out lawlessness in a county where she gets no aid or encouragement whatever from the duly constituted law enforcement officers and a judge sworn to maintain law and order." And to top it off, Davis had admonished Brannon, "I don't think you can do it. I admire your spunk but doubt your judgment." Sullens concluded that Brannon planned to carry on her law and order campaign despite Davis's attempt to muzzle her. He noted that Brannon's contempt citation had nothing to do with her anti-bootlegging campaign though Davis went out of his way to mention it. To Sullens, Davis's actions amounted to an open "slap in the face" towards Brannon. Sullens predicted that the Mississippi Supreme Court would "slap the

ears of the circuit judge right down under his toe nails.” The Supreme Court did just that in April 1947 when it overturned Davis’s sentence and probation of Brannon. The court ruled that Davis’s actions had “no justification of the conviction” and declared that Brannon had done nothing, which would “impede justice, or would obstruct, defeat or corrupt the administration thereof.” McAtee’s murder went unpunished, but Brannon’s reputation and notoriety only grew.⁶¹

Leon McAtee actually was the second African American murdered at the hands of a white person in Holmes County in 1946. In April 1946, Brannon reported that Thad Dickerson, a former barber and well-known night watchman at a lumberyard in the south Holmes community of Pickens, got into a skirmish with a sixteen-year-old black youth named Stanley Dennis. Brannon noted that Dickerson was standing on a street in Pickens, saw Dennis loitering in front of a black café, and ordered the young man to move. When Dennis did not move, Dickerson pulled out a handgun and fired, killing the youth. The next week the Grand Jury brought a murder indictment against Dickerson. Dickerson’s actions proved so heinous to many leading white citizens of Pickens that they hired extra attorneys to help with the prosecuting attorney. Dickerson’s trial took place in October. Several whites testified against Dickerson. One white man testified that Dennis posed no threat to Dickerson, and in fact, Dennis was holding a basketball in his hands when Dickerson shot him. Pickens Mayor H.S. McKie testified that he could tell that Dickerson was drunk at the time of the shooting. In his defense, Dickerson testified that Dennis had been bouncing a basketball and bumped into him as the two met

⁶¹ Frederick Sullens Editorial, *Jackson Daily News*, reprinted in *Lexington Advertiser*, 31 October 1946; *Lexington Advertiser*, 10 April 1947.

crossing a street. According to Dickerson, he spoke harshly to Dennis, and then Dennis attacked him and bit Dickerson's hand. Dickerson then allegedly fired a warning shot at Dennis, but Dennis kept coming and began to reach in his pocket. Dickerson then shot and killed Dennis. Despite the testimony by white witnesses, the jury acquitted Dickerson after only thirty minutes of deliberation.⁶²

Despite her belief in the basic rightness of Jim Crow, she also believed that the law applied to everyone. This meant that no white man could brazenly murder a black youth in broad daylight and get away with it. From the evidence presented at the trial, she thought Dickerson was guilty and said so. Yet, knowing the sensibilities of her readers, she issued her verdict in a roundabout way. In an editorial after the verdict came down, Brannon noted that several witnesses swore to seeing Dickerson's drunkenness. Also, many said Dennis held a basketball and did not pose a threat. To Brannon, a verdict of guilt should have been evident. Thus, she concluded, "the Holmes county jury trying the man found him 'not guilty.' We wonder if God sees it that way."⁶³

Brannon's inconsistency over the Dennis shooting and the McAtee murder was striking. Did she question the jury's acquittal of Thad Dickerson because the shooting was so blatantly egregious, and the prosecution had a lot of white support? And did she gloss over the natural conclusion that Dodd and the others were more than likely guilty of murder because, as she said, they were "reputable?" Whatever her reasons, she refrained from lambasting the actions of the Dodds in comparison to Dickerson.

⁶² *Lexington Advertiser*, 18 April, 24 October 1946

⁶³ *Ibid.*, 24 October 1946.

Dickerson made headlines again in July 1949 in another shooting incident with an African American teenager. According to Brannon's account, Dickerson was driving on Highway Twelve east of Lexington when he encountered a sixteen-year-old African American teenager named Lee "Teddy" Dodson. At the time of the meeting, Dickerson was on duty as an Assistant Game Warden for Holmes County. For some unknown reason, Dickerson requested that Dodson accompany him to Kosciusko, the county seat of Attala County, 30 miles further east. Dodson declined, and Dickerson got out and ordered the youth into his truck. When Dodson tried to flee, Dickerson drew his sidearm and fired at Dodson twice, hitting him once in the arm. Dickerson was later charged with "intent to kill" and was released on \$1,000 bail.⁶⁴

This was too much for Brannon. In her mind, the crime was not racially based. Instead it served as an example of legal misconduct and violence. Brannon noted that Dickerson's sullied his tenure as assistant game warden with a reputation for getting involved in shootings. She mentioned Dickerson's shooting of young Stanley Dennis, in 1946. Considering Dickerson's track record, she concluded, "Common sense dictates he should not be allowed to carry a gun." She reminded her readers that whites had raised money for Dickerson's prosecution, "But he went free." She concluded that Dickerson needed to resign, not only for his own sake, but also for the sake of the public. Dickerson did resign by the end of the month. He lost an appeal of his conviction in 1951. His conviction brought a sentence of seven years.⁶⁵

⁶⁴ *Lexington Advertiser*, 2 July, 4 August 1949.

⁶⁵ *Ibid.*, 11, 31 August 1949; 18 October 1951; 15 July 1954.

Hazel Brannon Smith used similar language to call for Sheriff Richard Byrd's resignation after he shot an unarmed black man in July 1954. She wrote that after the shooting that Byrd had "shown without question that he is not fit to hold that high office. He should, in fact, resign." What was the difference? Most white southerners thought the Jim Crow hierarchy was immutable in 1949. In 1954, many whites thought that the unthinkable would happen, that the *Brown* decision would overthrow segregation and the racial hierarchy. Local whites tolerated Brannon's her mild critiques of racial violence in 1949, but in the aftermath of *Brown*, many of her readers wanted a united front in regards to race. Smith's editorial comments about race and legal malfeasance in 1954 differed little from her critiques throughout the 1940s and early 1950s. Yet, *Brown* shifted the landscape and made many southern whites close ranks and expect community conformity in regards to race. When whites in Holmes County took extreme measures to defend Jim Crow, these actions frightened her, and she balked. Her dissent made her suspect in the eyes of many. Throughout the 1940s and early 1950s she banged the reactionary drum against the threat of civil rights for African Americans. When her readers began to take action on some of the rhetoric she had espoused, she flinched and pulled back. Though she had lived almost twenty years in Holmes County, her refusal to follow her neighbors down a reactionary path of resistance tabbed her as an outsider and a threat. The backlash of her peers would eventually push her to becoming an ally of African Americans in their drive to acquire civil rights. She became a collaborator in a movement that she once considered a dire foe.

CHAPTER IV

FROM POPULAR TO PARIAH: REJECTING MASSIVE RESISTANCE

“I am a firm believer in our Southern traditions and racial segregation, but not at the expense of justice and truth.”

Hazel Brannon Smith, *Lexington Advertiser* 10 November 1955.

By the early 1950s, Hazel Brannon Smith¹ had commented on the goings on in Holmes County and Mississippi for almost two decades. She gained state and national notoriety through her almost decade long crusade against bootleg liquor. In her columns, she consistently attacked the legal hypocrisy, the corruption, and the social upheaval fostered by illegal alcohol. With equal vigor, Smith defended Jim Crow segregation as the only solution for the coexistence of white and black southerners. She believed that a community newspaper’s primary responsibility lay in the protection of its citizens and the promotion of the public’s health which included promoting economic growth and other enterprises she believed worthwhile. This philosophy also meant attacking any perceived threat to the community at large. From the moment she bought the Durant News in 1936, she repeatedly expressed these sentiments. An October 1954 column demonstrates this philosophy. A newspaper is a public institution, she wrote, “because its primary object is to serve the public by keeping it informed.” If a newspaper does not serve the public, it does not prosper, and loses its usefulness and its influence. When it fails to take a firm

¹ Hazel Brannon met Walter D. Smith on a Caribbean cruise in 1949 and married him in 1950. From that point on, she referred to herself as Hazel Brannon Smith.

stand on issues of the day concerning the lives of its readers it is failing to live up to the highest traditions of journalism which is public service. It pays the penalty by being classed as a 'second rate' newspaper. . . We are here to serve this community and its people the best way we know how and this we shall continue to do for as long as the good Lord sees fit.²

By the early 1950s, in Smith's mind, the most important "issues of the day" for Holmes County and all of Mississippi were unchecked illegal liquor and federally-enforced social equality of African Americans.

These two issues began to coalesce in 1951 with the election of Richard F. Byrd as sheriff of Holmes County. During the summer of that year, Byrd ran on a platform that promised to continue the fight against bootlegging and organized crime started by his predecessor Ellis Wynn. While he had not totally eradicated illegal alcohol and juke joints, Wynn had inflicted a major dent in the business of bootlegging in Holmes County. When Byrd took office in January 1952, he issued a warning for slot machine owners to leave the county, and he promised to consistently raid nightclubs and arrest patrons found drinking on the premises. Smith responded with praise for Byrd and promised to use her personal column, *Through Hazel Eyes*, to bang the drum for Byrd's support.³

During his first few months in office, Byrd cracked down on a significant amount of the illegal alcohol trade and pushed many bootleggers and nightclub owner to refrain from openly practicing their trade. Yet, by the end of the year, conditions had started worsening again. This state of affairs brought disapproval from many of the citizens of

² *Lexington Advertiser*, 10 October 1954.

³ Richard F. Byrd campaign announcement, *Lexington Advertiser*, 23 August 1951; Sheriff Richard Byrd's warning to bootleggers and gamblers, *Lexington Advertiser*, 10 January 1952.

Holmes County. In December 1952, Smith published a letter by the adult Sunday School class of the Durant Methodist Church that reminded Byrd that two large clubs and several smaller ones had reopened. The class commended Byrd for his work in the spring of the year and urged him to keep raiding the illegal establishments in accordance with his campaign promises.⁴

By January 1954, the liquor situation had worsened to the point that Smith felt the need to criticize Byrd for his lack of law enforcement. She reported that seventeen people in the county possessed federal liquor stamps. These licenses meant that while prohibition was the law in Mississippi, an individual had federal authority to possess and sale alcohol. Smith pointed out that of the seventeen whiskey distributors, only three had bothered to pay their black market tax. These three men all had the last name of Taylor, and Smith reported that the state's tax records showed that the Taylors paid black market taxes on a total of \$423,195 worth of whiskey. Smith surmised that bootleggers like the Taylor's had nothing to fear from federal authorities since they possessed a federal license. Smith asked her readers, "Are other dealers not paying the black market tax?" Or did it mean the Taylors, who were related, held a monopoly on the liquor trade in Holmes County? Smith then took the opportunity to give a public slap to Sheriff Richard Byrd for not performing his duty. She concluded that the list of seventeen license holders stood as a disgrace in a state and a county that prohibited alcohol. Since the licenses were a matter of public record, they gave Byrd and his deputies a clear place to start

⁴ *Lexington Advertiser*, 18 December 1952.

cracking down, but only Smith prodded, “If they want to so discharge their sworn duties.”⁵

In the same edition, Smith reminded her readers with gallows humor of the serious nature of taking on organized bootleggers. She reported in her personal column that one bootlegger called her at home before the January 28 edition went to press and warned her to not mention any of his family in the paper. Smith said the bootlegger cautioned her that “If I put his name or the name of his brother in the paper that I was going to get my damned head blowed [sic] plum off my shoulders.” Smith thought the episode strange since the man did not operate a nightclub in the county or possess a license to distribute whiskey. She thought the man might have been a small time bootlegger. She responded with tongue planted firmly in cheek, “Anyway, it makes life interesting. I may be walking around here next week without a head.” Bootleggers carried on business in Holmes County seemingly unafraid of law enforcement. They seemed more afraid of Smith and her constant harangue, even to the point of threatening to murder her. Smith’s indictment of Byrd could not have been made clearer.⁶

As if a bootlegger threatening a local editor was not bad enough, in early January 1954, the entire state heard of a liquor fueled shootout between Holmes County law officials and a black man. The fracas left three men dead, several wounded, and most of the county stunned that such a thing could happen. The *Jackson Daily News*, the state’s largest newspaper, splashed the episode across its front pages. The context of the conflict and the subsequent gun battles confirmed Smith’s conviction that illegal booze and all of

⁵ Ibid., 28 January 1954.

⁶ Ibid., 28 January 1954.

its fallout was ruining the state and specifically Holmes County, and had to be addressed.⁷

On Saturday night, January 9, 1954, a black man named Percy Cobbins entered a country store owned by a white man named Toby Dickard in the little community of Brozville, several miles south of the county seat of Lexington. Dickard's store had the reputation as a place where groups of black and white men gathered to drink liquor and talk about current events. According to eyewitnesses, Cobbins walked into the store with a couple of bottles of whiskey sticking out of his back pockets. Dickard ordered Cobbins out of the store. An argument ensued, and Dickard's thirty year-old son, Willie Raymond, joined the fray. The tussle spilled out onto the front porch of the store, and suddenly, a shot rang out. The gunfire did not originate from either Cobbins or the Dickards. Eddie Noel, a 28-year-old African American and a friend of Cobbins, witnessed the pushing and shoving and decided to come to his friend's aid. Noel reached into his car, grabbed his .22 rifle, and fired at the Dickards. Noel's shot hit Willie Raymond Dickard in the chest. He died from his wound as relatives rushed him to the hospital. Noel later explained that he saw the argument spill out onto the porch and grew afraid that it would soon involve him.⁸

Noel fled the scene but another gun battle quickly ensued. Alerted to the shooting, Sheriff Richard Byrd and John Pat Malone, his 65 year-old Deputy, followed some of Dickard's enraged relatives out to the country store. On the way, they encountered Noel in his vehicle. Noel was not alone. His passengers included his wife

⁷ "Three Men Dead, Two Seriously Injured by Negro Man Following Argument Over Whiskey," *Lexington Advertiser* 14 January 1954; *Jackson Daily News*, 17 January 1954.

⁸ *Lexington Advertiser*, 14 January 1954; *Jackson Daily News*, 17 January 1954.

and child, and a friend named Jack Fisher. Byrd's posse managed to run Noel's vehicle off the road. Noel refused to surrender and fired upon the sheriff and his men. Byrd and the others soon found out that Noel was highly proficient with a rifle. During World War II, Noel served a stint in the Army and became a crack shot. In fact, when he returned to Mississippi after the war, he earned a reputation for being able to shoot matchsticks out of his wife's mouth. Upon encountering the sheriff, Noel's wife screamed for him to surrender. Noel refused and continued to pepper the posse's vehicles with gunfire, pinning them down. A small sized man, Noel used the cover of darkness, it being Saturday night, and managed to get behind Sheriff Byrd and his party. Once in an advantageous position, Noel shot Deputy Malone in the back of the head, killing him. Noel then fled into the woods.⁹

White Holmes Countians grew even angrier at this audacity, and hundreds of armed men began to scour the countryside in search of Noel. By Sunday evening, a posse of white men determined that Noel must have made it back to his home. Thinking they had Noel surrounded, two men went into the home with guns blazing, and two more remained on the front porch. Others circled around the house. They met with similar results from the previous day. Noel proved too fast and too accurate again. He killed Joseph Stewart, the first man into the house. Noel fired at the second man, forcing him to dive for cover. Noel then got to front door and opened fired on the two unsuspecting men on the front porch. He shot Andrew Smith, a former Deputy, in the face and F.E. Hocutt in the chest. Many of the remaining posse dropped their guns and ran away. Called a "lead splattering Negro" by *Jackson Daily News* reporter Jimmy Ward, Noel had turned

⁹ *Lexington Advertiser*, 14 January 1954, *Jackson Daily News*, 17 January 1954.

the tables on the white men of Holmes County. Like many whites who used violence against blacks with little provocation, Noel was a black man who was proficient with a rifle and willing to use it against whites who got in his way.¹⁰

For three long weeks, Noel scavenged food and stayed hidden from the large manhunt until he decided to turn himself in. One of his first jailhouse visitors was Smith herself who persuaded Noel to tell his side of the story for her readers. Noel explained that he fired upon the Dickards because he feared the men were going to attack him. He told Smith that it was dark, and he got scared watching the fight. Feeling threatened, he just reacted, and shot at the Dickards. Noel's demeanor alarmed local officials because they soon referred to him state mental health officials. In May 1954, they declared Noel incompetent to stand trial and interred him at the state mental facility outside of Jackson.¹¹

For Smith, the Noel shooting affirmed her argument that Byrd had failed to carry out his sworn duty that included enforcing the prohibition laws. In her personal column from January 14, where she first reported on the Noel shootings, Smith revealed that she had asked Byrd for a statement about what he planned to do about black honkytonks and "all other known places of vice in this county in the county." Byrd had not replied likely because the manhunt for Noel was in full swing. However, in the January 21 edition of

¹⁰ "Three Men Dead, Two Seriously Injured by Negro Man Following Argument Over Whiskey," *Lexington Advertiser*, 14 January 1954; Jimmy Ward, *Jackson Daily News*, 17 January 1954; The *Lexington Advertiser* later reported on 28 January 1954 that Deputy Andrew Smith would have to wait six weeks before getting the bullet removed from behind his ear. Hocutt was treated and eventually released, but then suffered a collapsed lung and had to rest under an oxygen tent in a hospital in Jackson. Andrew Smith would later serve as sheriff in the late 1950s and through the 1960s. Hazel Brannon Smith would praise him for breaking the back of the illegal liquor trade in the 1950s but then later spar with him in the 1960s over his intimidation and abuse of civil rights activists.

¹¹ *Lexington Advertiser*, 28 January, 27 May 1954.

the *Advertiser*, she asked her readers to think about who bore the blame for the incident. She noted that three men died, three women lost their husbands, two men suffered severe wounds, and hundreds of man-hours had been lost during the search. Hysteria gripped portions of the county and many citizens feared to travel the roads at night during the manhunt. Somebody needed to bear the blame. First, she blamed the bootleggers, men and women she characterized as having an “insatiable greed for the almighty dollar.” These individuals did not consider or care about the depths they had to sink in order to get it, “whether it is moonshine whiskey, running a Negro honkytonk, selling whiskey, operating slot machines, or employing ladies of the evening for the pleasure of their customers.” Second, she turned her criticism toward Byrd. She asked why the bootleggers operated basically unmolested, and she replied,

Is it because our duly elected law enforcement officers do not perform the duties they have sworn on their sacred honor to do? That is what most people believe. A scapegoat must be had-and the sheriff is the one to blame.¹²

Then, she turned the tables on her readers. She blamed herself and her readers and said, “It is because YOU and YOU and YOU and I have failed to live up to the highest standards of citizenship.” She reminded them that not enough citizens had taken the responsibility to serve on juries, or if they served, they failed bring guilty verdicts in the face of overwhelming evidence of bootlegging and its connected illegalities. Thus, the bootleggers grew more open and more brazen every year. Smith concluded that it was

¹² *Lexington Advertiser*, 21 January 1954. Capitalization in the original quote.

not enough to criticize Byrd. In her mind, the county would not have decent law enforcement until its citizens wanted it badly enough to work for it.¹³

While she attacked Sheriff Byrd, Smith also conveyed an understanding of the fractured racial climate of Holmes County. Despite her claims that the county's white and black population got along, she was not naïve enough to think a group of armed and angry white men would worry much if they found other African Americans aligned in their crosshairs while searching for Noel. Smith attempted to diffuse the possibility of white backlash. Thus, in the same issue she reported on the Noel shooting, Smith published a letter on the front page from Dr. Arenia Mallory and other leading African Americans in the county. Mallory served as the head of the all black Saints Industry and Literary School in Lexington. In the letter, the black leaders denounced Noel as an aberration, a desperado who committed crimes that happened once a century. To placate their white neighbors and diminish the possibility of violence against innocent African Americans, Mallory and the others wrote, "The attitude of our white citizens is proof of the justice and law abiding conduct of the leaders and people of our great county. We bow our heads in grief and shame with all citizens of our state and community." While black leaders and their allies like Smith put forth a public statement about the cooperation between blacks and white Holmes Countians, reality belied those assertions.¹⁴

¹³ Ibid., 21 January 1954.

¹⁴ Ibid., 14 January 1954. Smith wrote about the episode in a small memoir written for the journalistic endowment organization, the Alicia Patterson Fellowship. Written in 1983, Smith said the Noel shooting was the first time she realized "there was fear and tension between whites and blacks." Surely, she was being disingenuous. She had reported on whites killing blacks in the 1940s and how they escaped justice. By 1983, Smith was revered as a white journalist who was sympathetic to the civil rights movement in the 1960s. In reality, she had opposed integration. This must be a case of image building on her part. Hazel Brannon Smith, Hazel Brannon Smith, "Separate but Unequal," in *An American*

Facts contradicted this apparent harmony between African Americans and whites in the county. In the January 21 edition of the *Advertiser*, Smith not only slammed Byrd for his malfeasance in regards to liquor enforcement, she pointed out that he had developed a reputation for brutality toward African Americans in his custody. After the shootout with Eddie Noel, Byrd had arrested Noel's wife and his friend Jack Fisher. Smith reported the next week that Fisher suffered a serious wound to his throat while in jail. Byrd later explained that Fisher snatched a fork and tried to commit suicide by stabbing himself in the jugular vein. While it is possible that actually happened, Smith thought it unlikely because she possessed other reports of Byrd committing violence against African Americans whether in custody or not.¹⁵

During the Noel manhunt, even the *Jackson Daily News* mentioned that Byrd had a reputation for maltreatment of African Americans. Reporter Jimmy Ward, later editor of the *Jackson Daily News*, wrote that Byrd "had been criticized for treating Negroes rough in Holmes County." In Ward's view, Byrd was totally justified in his actions following the shooting. Ward wrote, "For a man who has been shot at and his deputy shot through the hat and the head by a killer in the night, it was time to be tough." In regards to Byrd's treatment of other African Americans Ward admitted, "I know not what the sheriff did to Negroes before this manhunt began." Smith disagreed. She believed Byrd deserved criticism on two connected fronts. She berated Byrd because he had failed to quell the growth of the sale of illegal booze and all the other vices that went with it, as well as allowing nightclubs and juke joints across the county to flourish. Second, Byrd

Community Newspaper Under Pressure, Alicia Patterson Fellowship Report, Volume 6 #6, Accessed 10 January 2012, http://www.aliciapatterson.org/APF0606/Brannon_Smith/Brannon_Smith.html.

¹⁵ *Lexington Advertiser*, 21 January 1954.

earned a reputation for assaulting not only black men in his custody but also in public. Many of these encounters took place in front of these same nightclubs and juke joints.¹⁶

Other citizens of Holmes County agreed with Smith's criticism of Byrd and voiced their own discontentment. A group called the Citizens of Holmes County Interested in Good Government printed several half page declarations in the February 4 *Lexington Advertiser*. In one, the group reprinted the campaign notice Byrd had used back on August 23, 1951. In his message, Byrd promised voters that as sheriff he would raid every place selling liquor and running slot machines. He vowed to keep raiding these kinds of establishments until they went out of business. Another declaration quoted Byrd from the January 21, 1954 *Advertiser* where Byrd defended his department's performance and offered that the problems of the county had been around for a long time. The group's announcement charged "Byrd ... was not doing the best he can." The advertisement listed several points in an attempt to prove Byrd's malfeasance. It declared that seventeen joints sold whiskey in the county. Also, whiskey merchants carried out over one million dollars' worth of business in the county in 1952 and 1953. Further, the number of moonshine stills had reached an all time high. The organization further charged that while Byrd cracked down on joints in Durant during his first six months in office, he had allowed bootleg operations to shift to Lexington and the western part of the county. Only the threat of intervention by Governor Hugh White with National Guard troops, and not Byrd's presence, had forced some joints to place their gambling devices

¹⁶ Jimmy Ward, *Jackson Daily News*, 17 January 1954. Ward became editor of the *Jackson Daily News* in 1957 and served in the position till 1984. During the 1950s and 1960s he was an adamant defender of segregation and rejected any attempt to procure black civil rights. See David R. Davies and Judy Smith, "Jimmy Ward and the *Jackson Daily News*" in David R. Davies, ed. *The Press and Race: Mississippi Journalists Confront the Movement* (Jackson, Mississippi: University of Mississippi Press, 2001), 86.

under wraps. The broadside concluded that the Noel shooting, first having its origin in whiskey, had brought bad publicity to the county. The writers of the announcement urged citizens to either call Byrd if they thought he was doing a good job, or call his office and demand that he keep his campaign promises.¹⁷

Stung by the criticism, Sheriff Byrd and his supporters pushed back. Smith reported on February 11, 1954 that she and others who had criticized Byrd felt pressured to stop the law and order campaign and their questioning of Byrd's performance. She gave an example in the February 18 *Advertiser*. She reported that Byrd called and verbally abused a man who spoke out against the sheriff at a public meeting. The meeting had convened to review the Byrd's performance. According to Smith, Byrd obtained photographs of the man at a private party that served liquor. Byrd threatened the man with bodily harm for speaking out. Then the sheriff went even further. He made a poster that included the picture and some derogatory comments about the private citizen. Byrd posted the flyer in a private business, and later put it in an office in the county courthouse in Lexington.¹⁸

Smith asked her readers if they wanted a dictatorship in Holmes County, where a small group could dictate what the press wrote about and what citizens could speak publicly about. She again charged Byrd with being derelict in carrying out his duties. In a front page signed editorial "On Intimidation," Smith castigated Byrd even further. She denounced his used of intimidation and reminded her readers that a sheriff served as a paid public official. In no way was he a law unto himself. In Smith's mind, Byrd had

¹⁷ *Lexington Advertiser*, 4 February 1954.

¹⁸ *Ibid.*, 11, 18 February 1954.

threatened several basic freedoms: the freedom of the press, the freedom to associate, and the freedom to speak one's mind in a public forum. She promised that anyone who intended to curtail her and the public's basic rights needed to expect a fight. Smith said that regardless of whether or not Byrd's could be deemed criminal, he "already stands convicted in the minds of all those familiar with all of the true facts of the case." She surmised that if Byrd intended to publicly embarrass everyone who publicly opposed him, he would remain very busy the rest of his term.¹⁹

In the next week's front-page editorial, "Our Responsibilities," Smith again linked Byrd's failure and bootlegging's success. She surmised if everyone in Mississippi who had taken a drink was suddenly lined up and shot, the state's population would have decreased dramatically. She challenged her readers to see the difference between taking a drink in one's home and challenging bootleggers who were branching out into areas of organized crime. Smith said it was one thing if a bootlegger quietly sold some booze on the side, but it was an entirely different story when they brazenly came out in the open and thought they could control the county through corruption and intimidation.²⁰

In attacking Byrd and the bootleggers, Smith got even bolder. In her February 11 column, she took umbrage with Byrd's treatment of African Americans in his custody. Based on the Jack Fisher stabbing incident, and stories told to Smith, she charged that Byrd violated his oath to uphold the law "by treating prisoners in an unjust and inhumane manner." She said if things were left unchecked, conditions would get so bad that people would be afraid to speak out. That constituted dictatorship. To those who thought she

¹⁹ Ibid., 11 February 1954.

²⁰ Ibid., 18 February 1954.

was stirring up trouble by her news reporting, she wrote in the her February 18 column that she ran “a family newspaper dedicated to the task of making this community and this county a better place in which to live and rear a family.” She further stated that in the past she had tried to play down crime news. However, with the increase of lawlessness, she felt compelled to speak up for the sake of community. She stated, “We do not make the news. We only print it. And our responsibility to our readers to give them to the best of our knowledge and abilities the news as it happens is not a small or easy job.”²¹

Smith’s determination to report all the news for “the sake of the community” had brought her a lot of success since her arrival in Holmes County in 1936. Bootleggers obviously did not care for her. She had also angered public officials like Sheriff Richard Byrd by holding their feet to the fires of public scrutiny. Yet, more and more people read her newspapers, and her advertisers only increased. Her success allowed for a lavish lifestyle. In an autobiographical written in 1984, Smith recounted her financial position and lifestyle:

My life had always been comfortable in Lexington. My two papers in Holmes County were paid for. I wore good clothes, and drove a Cadillac convertible. I went to Europe on vacation for four months and had more money in my bank account when I returned than I did when I left.²²

For almost two decades, Smith had promoted community improvement in her Durant and Lexington newspapers. Her stance against bootlegging and organized crime had earned her several enemies in the county, but the majority of her readers appreciated her crusade. They demonstrated this by subscribing to her papers as well as advertising

²¹ Ibid., 11, 18, 25 February 1954.

²² Hazel Brannon Smith, “Bombed, Burned, and Boycotted,” *An American Newspaper Under Press, Alicia Patterson Fellowship, 1984*, Accessed 10 January 2012, <http://aliciapatterson.org/stories/bombed-burned-and-boycotted>.

in them. Smith was good for business, and the business was good for her. By the early 1950s, she stood as one of the most successful businesswomen in Mississippi, if not in the entire South, but things were about to change. She failed to realize that standing for “law and order” had to include standing for civil rights.

Though she could not have known it at the time, in May 1954 the United States Supreme Court made a ruling that would lead to a series of events that slowly unraveled Smith’s clean reputation, her jet-set lifestyle, and her financial livelihood. In the *Brown* ruling, the court declared separate but equal school systems unconstitutional and called for white southern schools to integrate with “all deliberate speed.” In reality, *Brown*’s repercussions reverberated throughout the entire South. It started the slow and painful dismantling of Jim Crow society, first in the South, then in the rest of the country.²³

While the *Brown* decision shocked many across Mississippi, state legislators had known months before that the desegregation decision was coming. In the March 25 edition of the *Advertiser*, Smith published a letter on the front page from Edwin White, one of the three Holmes County representatives in the state legislature. White stated that the legislature was working hard to bring black schools up to white school standards, but word had come from Washington that the U.S. Supreme Court would soon issue a decision that would declare separate but equal as unconstitutional. White assured his constituents that they had nothing to fear. He promised that the state legislature would take appropriate steps to maintain segregation. In other words, they would use legal wrangling to get around the decision. He then stated his beliefs why the blacks and

²³ *Brown v. Board of Education of Topeka, Kansas* 347 U.S. 483.74.S.Ct. 686, L. Ed. 873 1954 U.S. 2094

whites should not go to school together. By printing this letter on the front page, Smith made it clear that she assented to these statements.²⁴

Congressman White cited the standard defense of segregation endorsed, at least publicly, by the overwhelming majority of white Mississippians. First, the Bible mandated segregation since God had created separate races. Second, Mississippi consisted of equal numbers of white and black residents, and thus separate schools maintained harmony. Third, scientific evidence pointed to a distinction between the races. Therefore, it was imperative for all races to keep their integrity intact. Faced with these realities, white Mississippians would fight any attempt at racial amalgamation and the subsequent corruption of the white race. In conclusion, White assured his readers that the state legislature would abolish the public schools and aid local whites in the formation of private schools if needed.²⁵

Even though the Mississippi legislature knew a desegregation ruling was coming, the reality that white supremacy might end horrified whites across the state when the U.S. Supreme Court handed down the *Brown* decision on May 17, 1954. Never one to shy away from controversial subjects, Smith thought it her duty as a newspaper editor to respond to her reader's questions about the decision's implications. She devoted most of her May 20, 1954 column to the issue. She tried to ease her reader's qualms by stating that the decision posed no immediate threat. She surmised that two or three years would pass before the court even attempted to bring about enforcement. That meant state leaders had time to develop well thought out plans to make sure that integration did not

²⁴ Edwin White, "Letter to the Editor," *Lexington Advertiser* 25 March 1954.

²⁵ *Ibid.*, 25 March 1954.

come to pass. She wrote, “This is probably the most complex problem we have ever had to work out in the South and it is going to require the very best that is in us to solve it to the best interests of all concerned. But solve it we will.” She lay some of the blame for the ruling at the feet of Mississippians themselves, arguing that if white Mississippians had done more to equalize African American schools, then cases like *Brown* would not have emerged.²⁶

Then Smith turned and blamed the real culprit for the decision: outside agitators. She believed that no matter how much effort white communities could have put forth to equalize African American schools, the litigation would have still come “because the influence behind the Negroes filing the cases is not what it should be.” Smith admitted that the “Supreme Court may be morally right when it says ‘separate educational facilities are inherently unequal’” but she argued that practicality demanded that segregated schools be maintained. She said this situation was “highly desirable in the South and other places where the two races live and work side by side.”²⁷

Smith’s sentiments concerning the repercussions of *Brown* put her squarely in the mainstream of white thought in Mississippi. She reflected the racial sentiments of most of her white readers, as almost all Mississippi newspapers did. Journalism scholar Susan Weill described the Mississippi press’s reaction to civil rights crises like *Brown* as:

. . . nearly unanimous, however, in the view that no Mississippian, black or white, was ready for the reality of a racially integrated society. Many of the editors argued that federal civil rights laws unconstitutionally revoked the individual rights of the states. And according to the vast majority of the Mississippi daily press editorials from 1954 to 1964, the

²⁶ Ibid., 20 May 1954.

²⁷ *Lexington Advertiser*, 20 May 1954.

notion that blacks and white were equal as races of people remained unacceptable and inconceivable.²⁸

Smith was no exception. For weeks following the May 1954 decision, Smith laid out her case for keeping segregation intact and made her stance plain and clear. Segregation was in “the best interest of both races.” She argued that “trouble results” when whites or blacks crossed the color line. Blacks were inferior, in her mind, and segregation needed to continue because African Americans had not reached the levels of white progress. Integration would retard white advancement. Any attempt to rush blacks up to the levels of whites would foster conflict. She wrote, “We are proud of the progress our southern Negroes are making - and we want them to continue to make progress. But we know that progress is threatened when either race tries to force the other to do something – or to prevent it from doing something.” Her ideas have to be considered in the midst of a context where the majority of her white audience believed that northern whites and southern blacks had dominated the Reconstruction era after the Civil War and victimized southern whites. Then gallant southern whites, known as Redeemers, had retaken control of the South by force by the mid 1870s. Smith took an alarmist tone about *Brown* and warned that the “present situation has all of the ingredients necessary for a bloody revolution – if people don’t keep their heads.” She further warned that the current milieu was such that “a few well trained Communists could come into our section of the country and promote a revolution overnight.” Where southern white slave owners feared an abolitionist sneaking in and stirring up a slave revolt in the years before the

²⁸ Susan M. Weill, “Mississippi’s Daily Press in Three Crises,” in David R. Davies, ed., *The Press and Race: Mississippi Journalists Confront the Movement* (Jackson, Ms.: University Press of Mississippi, 2001), 18-19

Civil War, Smith inferred that *Brown* and the fervor it enflamed, could pave the way for Communists to stir up blacks in the South and foment a twentieth century revolution.²⁹

Although Smith rejected the idea of integration on a number of social and cultural grounds, she also rejected the *Brown* decision itself as a violation of states rights. She believed that the federal government possessed no authority over a state's public school system. She declared, "In fact, we do not believe the Supreme Court had the constitutional authority to declare school segregation illegal. But it did." She concluded that time would tell how the situation would work itself out. While echoing her reader's feelings about the implications of integration, she differed from many whites in Mississippi by keeping the discussion framed within a legal context. In other words, she did not espouse a call for lawless conduct to thwart the decision.³⁰

In her May 20 column, she took potshots at southern Democrats. Dripping with sarcasm, her column hoped southern politicians were happy with *Brown* since they had remained largely loyal to the Democratic Party. Smith pointed out that Franklin Roosevelt and Harry Truman (both Democrats) had appointed the majority of the Supreme Court justices. Thus, southern Democrats shared in the blame for the court's ruling. In Smith's mind, the *Brown* decision germinated from the bitter seeds of the New Deal. Back in 1944, she argued that the white South had to abandon its steadfast fealty to Roosevelt. Smith charged that if Roosevelt's New Deal policies went unchecked, they would allow more Communist influence in the government and even worse, "eliminate segregation of the races and destroy the white civilization of the South." Ten years

²⁹ *Lexington Advertiser*, 20 May 1954.

³⁰ *Ibid.*, 20 May 1954.

before *Brown*, she wrote that the South would reject the notion of integration. Shocking and offensive to white sensibilities, any attempt at integration would foster bloodshed and rebellion. All the way back in 1944, Smith had charged that a key Communist goal was to foster integration of the races and thus create discord in the nation. In other words, the idea of integration was not just anti-Southern but anti-American.³¹

It's clear that up to May 17, 1954, Smith firmly believed in white supremacy and this philosophy shaped her columns and helped condition her readers' response to the coming of *Brown*. For Smith and most of her readers, the ruling was unconstitutional, immoral, Communist inspired, anti-American, and destined to be violently opposed. However, in the coming months and years, the way that Smith defended segregation would begin to distance her from the positions of her readers, advertisers, and Mississippi politicians.

Ten days after the Supreme Court handed down *Brown*, Smith amplified her reader's aversion to the decision by reprinting a letter from Robert Meek, a local attorney and regular letter contributor. The lawyer declared that the ruling was "a blow against the civilization of the South." Meek went on to blame the administrations of Roosevelt and Truman as well as those who voted for both men. Echoing Smith's own sentiments, Meek labeled the Democratic Party as betrayers of the South. The Democratic leadership needed to be discarded. Meek boasted that southerners were superior to "the northern people" and had always found solutions for their problems and would do so with the integration dilemma. Meek did not clarify what he meant by "solutions," but they

³¹ Ibid., 20 May 1954, 31 August 1944.

included strategies such as voter fraud and intimidation, disfranchisement and Jim Crow laws, economic enslavement and the constant threat of lynching.³²

With the county already up in arms over the threat to segregation, Smith still covered the main news of the county, and there was no more important story than the Eddie Noel murder case. On May 27, Smith put a large photograph of Noel's face on the front page of the *Advertiser* with the large headline, "Eddie Noel Found Insane." Smith reported that officials at state mental hospital at Whitefield had deemed the "slayer of three Holmes County white men" insane. These doctors believed Noel had been legally insane since puberty. They based their conclusions on the January 1954 shooting incidents and a 1945 Army psychological report which declared that Noel suffered from "homicidal tendencies." Calling this "sheer madness," Smith asked in her column why this report had not found its way into the hands of Holmes County authorities before the shootings.³³

The Eddie Noel story encapsulated two interrelated issues, illegal alcohol and the racial division. The unmitigated flow of illegal alcohol not only spawned corruption but also served as a possible tinder box for heightened racial conflict between inebriated black and white Mississippians. For Smith, *Brown* was a big enough threat to the established order. A culture of unregulated boozed and lawlessness threatened to even further fan the flames of racial discord.³⁴

³² Robert Meek, Letter to the Editor, *Lexington Advertiser* 27 May 1954.

³³ "Eddie Noel Found Insane," *Lexington Advertiser*, 27 May 1954; Smith noted in her brief 1983 memoir on the shooting that Noel still remained in the state mental home. "Separate but Unequal," in *An American Community Newspaper Under Pressure, Alicia Patterson Fellowship Report, Volume 6 #6*. Accessed 10 January 2012,

http://www.aliciapatterson.org/APF0606/Brannon_Smith/Brannon_Smith.html.

³⁴ *Lexington Advertiser*, 27 May 1954.

For the movers and shakers in Mississippi, the societal effects of illegal booze paled in comparison to maintaining the racial status quo, but in Holmes County, Smith argued that they were mutually reinforcing problems. In late May, in the Delta town of Greenwood, thirty six miles north of Lexington, a Circuit Judge named Tom Brady (pronounced “Braddy”) gave a speech at a meeting of the Sons of the American Revolution. Brady’s speech served as a call to arms for white Mississippians to rise up and resist the implementation of the Brown decision. He chastised the Supreme Court for overthrowing fifty years of legal precedent. He claimed the decision did not take into consideration the inferiority of “Negroes.” Brady charged that the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP), the organization leading the charge for integration, held ties to Communism. Brady also asserted that the tale of history revealed that all great civilizations like Babylon, Greece, and Rome, declined when they intermingled with African blood. He concluded:

Whenever and wherever the white man has drunk the cup of black hemlock, whenever and wherever his blood has been infused with blood of the Negro, the white man, his intellect and his culture have died. This is as true as two plus two equals four. The proof is that Egypt, India, and the Mayan civilization, Babylon, Persia, Spain and all others have never and can never rise again.³⁵

Brady’s speech gave angry whites their marching orders. If the federal government actually tried to implement integration, then the state of Mississippi should abolish all public schools. He eschewed violence and instead advised whites to unleash a “cold war” and impose an “economic boycott” on African Americans who tried to integrate the white public schools.” Brady’s speech thrilled his audience and several

³⁵ Tom Brady, quoted in Hodding Carter, III, *The South Strikes Back* (Garden City, NY: Doubleday, 1959), 26-28

suggested he write it up as a booklet. He did and published it with the title of *Black Monday*. The title came from an expression coined by John Bell Williams, a U.S. Congressman from Mississippi, in reference to the *Brown* decision that came out on Monday, May 17, 1954.³⁶

This speech fired up a planter and World War II veteran from the nearby town of Indianola by the name of Robert “Tut” Patterson. Patterson and other planters met soon after Brady’s speech and formed the White Citizens’ Council on July 11, 1954. This was no fringe outfit. The Citizens’ Council consisted of the area’s elite, namely planters, lawyers, bankers, merchants, and other established community leaders. They dedicated themselves to the sole purpose of preventing the overthrow of Jim Crow and white supremacy. Obviously, the first step involved stopping the implementation of the *Brown* decision.³⁷

On the first Saturday night in July, a week before the Indianola meeting, racial animosity and Smith’s war against illegal liquor and official malfeasance all came to a head outside a black juke joint. In the July 8 *Lexington Advertiser*, Smith reported that five days earlier Sheriff Byrd shot a young black man named Henry Randle outside a black nightclub in Tchula, a hamlet in the Delta part of Holmes County located 45 miles southeast of Indianola. According to her sources, Smith reported that Byrd stopped and

³⁶ Ibid., 26-28; The standard work on the White Citizens’ Council is Neil McMillan, *The Citizens’ Council: Organized Resistance to the Second Reconstruction 1954-1964* (Urbana, Ill.: University of Illinois Press, 1971, 1994); see also Hodding Carter III, *The South Strikes Back* (Garden City, NY: Doubleday, 1959); Phillip Abbot Luce, *The White Citizens’ Council 1954-1959*, Masters Thesis (Ohio State University, 1960); James Silver, *Mississippi: The Closed Society* (Jackson, Mississippi: University of Mississippi Press, 2012, reprint); James Graham Cook, *The Segregationists* (New York: Appleton-Century-Crofts, 1962); Reed Sarratt, *The Ordeal of Segregation: The First Decade* (New York: Harper and Row, 1966); Stephanie Rolph, *Displacing Race: White Resistance and Conservative Politics in the Civil Rights Era South*, PhD Dissertation (Mississippi State University, 2009).

³⁷ Hodding Carter, III, *The South Strikes Back* (Garden City, NY: Doubleday, 1959), 26-28.

accosted Randle and a group of young black men standing outside a black nightclub. The black men started “whooping” as Byrd and other law officials drove by. Byrd confronted Randle in front of other black patrons and struck the young man across the face. When Randle raised his arm to cover his face, Byrd ordered him to “get going.” As Randle tried to flee, Byrd drew his pistol and fired several times at Randle, hitting him once in the back of his thigh. David Minter, a white physician from Providence Farm near Tchula, later treated Randle and confirmed that he had been shot in the back of his leg. In her account, Smith reported that she had tried to contact Byrd for a comment but had been unable to reach him.³⁸

For Smith, the Randle shooting served as the final piece of evidence needed to indict Sheriff Byrd in the court of public opinion. During his two and half years in office, she had castigated him for letting bootleggers regain a foothold in the county. She strenuously objected to his growing reputation for police brutality and abuse of power. In the mid 1940s, she had demanded Sheriff Walter Murtagh’s resignation over his dereliction of duty in regards to bootlegging. In 1949, she thought the community welfare had to be served when she called for the resignation of Game Warden Thad Dickerson for shooting an unarmed black youth. By July of 1954, she believed enough evidence existed to call for Byrd’s resignation. She did so in the July 15 issue of the *Advertiser*.

In her column, she referred her readers to a pending federal case where a black Mississippian had taken the sheriff in the southern Mississippi county of George to court

³⁸ *Lexington Advertiser*, 8 July 1954; Minter’s treating of Randle mentioned in James Graham Cook, *The Segregationists* (New York: Appleton-Century-Crofts, 1962), 38.

over a pistol-whipping incident. Smith surmised that peace officers did not have the authority to abuse anyone. In Smith's view, Byrd's actions had made him a menace to the community at large. She wrote, "Decent citizens do not long stand for such conduct where it is brought to light. We know we cannot live in an atmosphere of fear-whether we are white or black." Ironically, most African Americans would have said that living in a state of pressure and fear was their normal condition in Mississippi in 1954. Smith soon came to understand that personally.³⁹

Smith went further and put an editorial in the center of the front page, entitled "The Law Should Be for All." There she laid out the case for why she thought Byrd needed to resign. She wrote, "The laws of America are for everyone – rich and poor, strong and weak, white and black and all the other races that dwelt within our land." She argued that Byrd's conduct was intolerable and had to end. She surmised, "The vast majority of Holmes County people are not red necks who look with favor on the abuse of people because their skins are black." She pointed out that Byrd accosted two other men the night he shot Henry Randle. According to Smith, seven other instances of abuse had occurred during Byrd's tenure. As story after story emerged of Byrd's brutality, they grew too numerous to dismiss as hearsay. She concluded that Byrd "has shown us that without question that he is not fit to occupy that high office. He should, in fact, resign."⁴⁰

The editorial claimed to be about law and order, but it was certainly also about race. What Smith failed to recognize was that, while there had been a mild amount of tolerance awarded her in regards to her criticisms of abuses within Jim Crow in 1949, it

³⁹ Ibid., 15 July 1954.

⁴⁰ Ibid., 15 July 1954.

had vanished by the summer of 1954. In the months and years following *Brown*, the white leadership and a large number of her readers in Holmes County demanded a united front against any threat to the racial hierarchy, and even defending a black victim against brutality could and would be seen by many white Mississippians as an endorsement of African American civil rights. Smith believed that she remained consistent in her views. She firmly believed in the merits of segregation, but this did not mean that Jim Crow was free from criticism when it threatened to sink to the level of lawlessness. This would threaten the community as a whole. Most whites in her community, or at least the ones in leadership positions, however, did not see it that way. They saw themselves under siege. Integration threatened their way of life, their cherished values, and more bluntly, their power and perceived superiority. Ironically, the very white community that Smith believed she was promoting and protecting came to view her criticisms and her refusal to back down as outright betrayal and detrimental to society at large. As whites in Holmes County and the state at large circled the wagons to fight integration and the threat to the Jim Crow hierarchy, any dissenting voice came to be viewed with loathing and suspicion. As John Egerton noted in his work, *Speak Now Against the Day: The Generation Before the Civil Rights Movement in the South*, southern editors like Hazel Brannon Smith faced a “hazardous trade” in trying to make a living while at the same time telling their readers things they did not want to hear. Egerton pointed out that “no state was tougher than Mississippi, where a simple call for obedience to the law came to be considered a radical act, and a strong defense of due process or respect of the courts and the Constitution was

tantamount to betrayal.” Indeed, while Smith believed that she had kept her newspaper on a steady, constant course, the tides had changed.⁴¹

Immediately after Smith called for Byrd’s dismissal, he retaliated by suing her for libel. She fired back in her July 22 column rejecting Byrd’s charge. Smith claimed that her defense was truth, and that she had never intentionally printed false news. Refusing to keep quiet, she argued that a sheriff had the responsibility of promoting harmony between the races and that could be achieved by acting justly.⁴²

The white establishment in Holmes County wanted solidarity to fight integration. They did not care about racial harmony, and they needed Smith to get on board. The Byrd/Randle shooting occurred on July 3, 1954. The white leaders of Indianola formed the first Citizens’ Council on July 11. Smith recounted that a few days later a prominent Lexington man came into the editor’s office and talked with her about a soon to be held meeting to form a chapter of the Citizens’ Council. In fact, the Holmes County group formed the second chapter of the Citizens’ Council. Smith thought that the man wanted publicity for the meeting, but instead he told her it was a meeting for men only. He wanted cooperation from Smith. He wanted her paper to support their efforts through her editorials. According to Smith the man said, “If a Nigra won’t go along with our thinking on what’s best for the community as a whole, he’ll simply have his credit cut off.” Smith asked the man’s opinion on the black reaction to the notion of white men organizing. The man replied, “Well, it might be a good thing for them to be a little bit scared.” This led Smith to retort, “No, it’s not good thing for anyone to be a little bit scared. People

⁴¹ John Egerton, *Speak Now Against the Day: The Generation Before the Civil Rights Movement in the South* (Chapel Hill, NC: University of North Carolina Press, 1995), 548-549.

⁴² *Ibid.*, 22 July 1954.

can't live under fear, and it will end up with all of us scared and it will be a big scare. What you are proposing to do is take away the freedom of all the people in this community." Smith recounted this meeting in an interview in 1965, and she retold it in a short memoir in 1983. Though she did not publicly reveal the details of the meeting in her paper in 1954, she cryptically alluded to it in her July 29, 1954 column. In the column, she asked her readers to remain calm about the Brown decision. She surmised that the implementation of integration would come years later if at all. She thought the problem could be solved through school equalization or by zoning. Then she made a statement that had to be referring to formation of the Citizens' Council, and specifically the encounter in her office. She wrote,

In the meanwhile a few well-meaning and usually intelligent people in our state are doing a lot of talking that isn't helping anyone or anything- in fact, their fears are playing squarely into the hands of an even smaller group that is not adverse to causing trouble among the races in Mississippi and elsewhere.⁴³

For Smith, the talk of organized white resistance sounded ominous. In fact, she viewed the emergence of the Citizens' Council in the mid 1950s in the same light as the organized bootleg rackets of the 1940s. They both spawned the subjugation of the legal system, violence, and threatened civil liberties such as freedom of association and freedom of the press. Against the backdrop of the Cold War, Smith also thought that a

⁴³ Smith recounted the encounter in T. George Harris, "The Eleven Year Siege of Mississippi's Lady Editor," *Look*, 16 November 1965; *Lexington Advertiser*, 29 July 1954; Holmes County listed as the second chapter of the Citizens' Council is found in Hodding Carter, Jr. *First Person Rural* (Garden City, NY: Doubleday, 1963), 221.

group like the White Citizens' Council could promote such racial hostility that the South could become fertile ground for a Communist insurgence among African Americans.⁴⁴

The resistance that Smith met in Holmes County permeated Mississippi and much of the Deep South. As far as Mississippi, the white leadership as well as most of the white populous wanted nothing to do with the dismantling of Jim Crow. They wanted all sources of the media to affirm traditional values concerning race. As David Davies noted in a study on Mississippi's press during the civil rights era, news editors in the Magnolia state did not take in consideration the black perspective concerning civil rights. Instead, "their news stories and editorial views about the movement usually reflected the dominant white viewpoint." God help the journalist who appeared to even remotely challenge the racial status quo. In his study on the white southern press in Tennessee and Mississippi during the early 1960s, Hugh Davis Graham concluded that, "Mississippi, even urban Mississippi, would not tolerate political heterodoxy on the part of a major newspaper." In other words, woe be to the news editor who even slightly questioned the rightness of Jim Crow. Any newspaper that hinted at this stood out as an "island of unorthodoxy in a monolithic sea." In his work looking at race relations between World War II and the 1980s, David Goldfield summed up the attitude Mississippians held toward the proper conduct of the state's media in regards to race. He wrote,

A rigorous censorship prevailed, blacking out national news broadcasts that depicted the state unfavorably, harassing editors who reported official

⁴⁴ Joseph Crespino, *In Search of Another Country: Mississippi and the Conservative Counterrevolution* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton Univ. Press, 2007), 11, 30-35, puts Smith in a group of Mississippi journalists, politicians, and business leaders who were "practical segregationists." They wanted to keep segregation in tact while at the same time avoiding violence and bad publicity. For many whites, led by the Citizens' Council, this practicality smacked of waffling and weakness. Most whites wanted a much stronger response, and thus condemned any person like Smith who promoted moderation

violence against blacks, banning films that hinted at racial or ethnic brotherhood, deposing ministers who offered contrary interpretations, and corrupting the language to the point where the truth became whatever the newspapers and political leaders declared, regardless of its response to reality.⁴⁵

What Smith failed to see was that she could not have it both ways. She found that the climate of anger and determined resistance by her white peers made it ever more difficult as the days passed to support the maintenance segregation while at the same time rejecting the methods employed to accomplish that goal. Yet, despite her criticism of organized white resistance, Smith continued throughout the summer of 1954 to make comments supporting segregation, as well as publishing letters from white and black readers in support of keeping the racial status quo. In the July 29 edition of the *Advertiser*, Smith printed another long letter from Edwin White, the state congressman from Holmes County. White argued that the *Brown* decision's call for integration violated God's law. He said that white Mississippians could disobey this federal mandate. In August, she published a letter by C.W. Falconer, a black educator from Newark, New Jersey. Falconer argued that integration was not working in the North and that all that blacks only wanted equal facilities. Smith herself weighed in and declared in an early July editorial and said, "The best interests of both races will be served by maintaining separate schools-and our Negro leaders realize this as much as anyone." A flaming liberal bent on integration, Hazel Brannon Smith was not. Yet, her belief in

⁴⁵ David R. Davies, "Introduction," David R. Davies, ed., *The Press and Race: Mississippi Journalists Confront the Movement* (Jackson, Mississippi: University Press of Mississippi, 2001), 12-13; Hugh Davis Graham, *Crisis in Print: Desegregation and the Press in Tennessee* (Nashville: Vanderbilt University Press, 1967), 315; David R. Goldfield. *Black, White, and Southern: Race Relations and Southern Culture 1940 to the Present* (Baton Rouge: LSU Press, 1990), 154

speaking her mind and criticizing what she saw as abuses of power and oppression put her on the outside of acceptable behavior in 1954 Holmes County, Mississippi.⁴⁶

Despite all her affirmations of southern traditions in regards to race, Smith's willingness to take on Sheriff Byrd and the subsequent libel trial turned many in the community against her. Once the popular editor, her editorial stance quickly transformed her into a pariah. By the fall of 1954, with the libel trial pending, Smith was feeling the pressure to conform, and she saw that it was affecting the state and the county as well.

Denouncing the growing fear and hostility, she wrote,

Never before in the past twenty years has there been so much suspicion and distrust, so much gloom and hatred abounding at home and abroad. Fear hangs like a dark cloud over our people, pitting brother against brother and friend against friend-as well as friend against foe. There are some who seek to stir up strife for purposes of their own. They appeal to prejudice and to ignorance-and their religion is the doctrine of hatred and greed implemented by the weapons of fear and distrust.⁴⁷

Smith was not the only one feeling pressure. A week after her editorial, in the September 30 *Lexington Advertiser*, Smith published a paid half page announcement by a man named A. D. Stewart. In the proclamation, Stewart claimed that he had been slandered by rumors that claimed he was affiliated with Providence Farm. David Minter, the physician who worked at the farm, treated Henry Randle's gunshot wound after Randle's run in with Sheriff Richard Byrd in July. Minter was also slated to testify at the Byrd/Smith libel trial in October that Randle's wound was on the back of his leg, supporting Smith's charge that the sheriff had callously shot Randle while he was running away. Minter's willingness to testify against Sheriff Byrd raised the ire of the

⁴⁶ *Lexington Advertiser*, 1, 29 July, 12 August 1954.

⁴⁷ *Ibid.*, 23 September 1954.

leaders of Holmes County, thus A.D. Stewart wanted to publicly quash any rumors that he was connected with Minter or Providence Farm.⁴⁸

The farm was situated near Tchula just inside the Delta part of Holmes County in view of the loess hills to the east. Two white men ran the farm. David Minter served as the farm's physician, and Eugene Cox worked as the business manager. Providence started out in 1936 as a Christian socialist cooperative Bolivar County, northwest of Holmes. Founded by nationally known Christian evangelist, Sherwood Eddy, the original cooperative sought to aid poor white and black sharecroppers who had been kicked off their land because of mechanization. The first attempt in Bolivar County failed, and Providence was acquired in Holmes County in 1939. By 1954, the farm consisted of a central compound surrounded by a number of rented sections to poor black famers. Minter and Cox provided a health clinic and educational facilities for local African Americans, but some local white residents also discreetly patronized the medical clinic. The white establishment had always considered the farm to be an oddity. However, after Minter testified on Smith's behalf, white leaders came to view Providence as a threat to the established order, and they looked for an avenue to attack the farm.⁴⁹

In October 1954, Smith went to court to defend herself against Byrd's libel charge. As the trial started, she put forth her philosophy in an October 7 column where

⁴⁸ Ibid., 30 September 1954

⁴⁹ For the history of Providence Farm, see Sherwood Eddy, Arthur Raper, and Sam Franklin, Jr., *The Cooperative Farm Carries On: An Account of the Providence Cooperative Farm* (Cruger, Mississippi: Executive Committee Providence Farm, 1947, 3 in A.E. Cox Collection: Department of Archives and Special Collections – Civil Rights/Race Relations, J.D. Williams Library, University of Mississippi, Oxford, Mississippi, box 76-3, Delta Foundations, Folder 30; Anthony P. Dunbar, *Against the Grain: Southern Radicals and Prophets 1929-1959* (Charlottesville, Virginia: University of Virginia Press, 1981), 109-119; Fred C. Smith, *Agrarian Experimentation and Failure in Depression Mississippi: New Deal and Socialism, the Tupelo Homesteads and the Delta and Providence Cooperative Farms*, Masters Thesis, Mississippi State University, 2002.

she reminded her readers that a newspaper was a public institution “because its primary object is to serve the public by keeping it informed.” For Smith, a newspaper that refused to take stands on issues that affected the public and report all the news stood as a second rate paper and failed “to live up to the highest traditions of journalism which is public service.” Her papers in Lexington and Durant had served the county for eighteen years, through triumphs and heartaches, in the effort “to build a better community.” She concluded, “We are here to serve this community and its people the best way we know how and this we shall continue to do for as long as the good Lord sees fit.”⁵⁰

The members of the community who sat on the jury, however, did not think Smith was properly serving them. They found her guilty of libel, and awarded Sheriff Byrd a judgment of \$10,000. In the October 14 *Advertiser*, Smith wrote that she believed “outside considerations” had swayed the jury, and not the merits of the case. What were these? Rumors had been going around before that trial that Smith had invited an African American to her home for dinner, and that Dr. David Minter was secretly a Communist. Smith herself had commented repeatedly between World War II and 1954 that the Communist Party in the United States had considered intermingling between blacks and whites as one of their prime goals. Minter had testified about Randle’s wound during the trial, demonstrating that the young man had been shot in the back of the leg. Besides this, Minter had the temerity to live on a farm that catered to a black clientele. For some, these realities provided enough evidence to conclude that Minter was a communist. For her part, Smith had overstepped the bounds of racial decorum by taking a black man’s

⁵⁰ *Lexington Advertiser*, 7 October 1954.

side over the legal authority. The jury sent a clear message to Smith. She needed to be silent in regards to racial matters.⁵¹

The verdict marked a major shift in Smith's relationship with the white establishment of Holmes County, a large number of her readers (black and white), and the state of Mississippi for that matter. Just as firm a believer in segregation as her neighbors, Smith would not be silent about events or tactics in defense of racial integrity that employed intimidation, lawlessness, or brutality. Her first responsibility was to report the news as best she could, come what may of the consequences. Thus, she began to find herself more and more out of step with her peers.

The libel verdict stung Smith and contrary to her claims that she held no personal grudge against Byrd, some venom spilled out in a November 4 column. In her mind, her feud with Byrd originated over his malfeasance concerning the enforcement of the liquor laws and police brutality. The lawsuit and subsequent verdict stood as attempts to eclipse her civil liberties as a journalist as well as force a decline in her social and economic standing in the community. She refused to take the attacks lying down and used her column to take yet another swing at Byrd. Smith commended outgoing Governor Hugh White for his stand on bootleg liquor. With the upcoming gubernatorial election, Smith urged her readers to elect a man who would fight lawlessness, and she took a verbal shot at Byrd. Failure to elect a strong law and order governor meant the people did not have "protection against men who run for sheriff on one platform and forget their campaign

⁵¹ Ibid., 14 October 1954; The charge of Communism against Minter found in Bill Miller, "Trial by Tape Recorder," *New York Daily Reporter*, 16 December 1955. A copy can be found in the A. E. Cox Collection, Special Collections, Mitchell Library, Mississippi State University, Box: Holmes County Mass Meeting, Folder: Mass Meeting-Minter and Cox 1955.

promises after being elected.” Smith argued that this kind of official had “no conscience” and would “look you straight in the eye and tell you one thing and then turn right around and do the opposite.” She concluded, “There are some sheriffs in office in Mississippi now who have lied to every man, woman, and child in their counties-but they have no more remorse than an egg-sucking dog.”⁵²

Smith’s feud with Byrd put her in a strange situation. She agreed completely with the basic philosophy of the White Citizens’ Council. Integration of the public schools would be a decisive blow against the Jim Crow hierarchy and could lead to the unraveling of accepted social norms. This in turn could foster a revolution in the South. However, Smith differed in her approach. She believed that law and order had to be upheld and that rational people, white and black, could find an acceptable solution in time. She also believed as a member of the press, she held the right to criticize any effort to oppose integration that subjugated the law or forced people to abandon the basic right of freedom of expression. Smith detested the idea of integration, but she detested dictatorships even more. This distinction forced a divide between her and the white leadership of Holmes County that demanded a unified front in resistance to any effort that supported the dismantling of Jim Crow segregation.⁵³

An example of how far Holmes County would go in the rejection of the possibility that *Brown* might be implemented came in November 1954. The Mississippi state legislature called a special session to consider a constitutional amendment that would abolish the public school system in case *Brown* became a reality. Smith printed on

⁵² Ibid., 4 November 1954.

⁵³ Ibid., 18 November 1954.

the front page a letter by Holmes Representative Ed White where he argued that the Supreme Court had left white southerners no choice if they wanted to prevent “racial amalgamation.” White stressed that the measure to shut down the public school system was necessary to protect white school children. In White’s view, segregation had to be prevented not deferred. County leaders presented the amendment for a vote in December and Holmes County whites voted overwhelmingly for the measure (2,393 to 70).⁵⁴

Smith agreed in principle, but she shrank back from the tactics that the white community wanted to use to insure support for the racial status quo. She believed that a solution could be found to the integration crisis, but not one that forced people to fear backlash for expressing their opinions. Ironically, before 1954 she had uttered many bellicose threats that revolution would break out if the federal government sought to overturn the racial status quo. Now that the reality seemed possible, it frightened her and forced her to adopt a more reasonable tone when many of her readers wanted a more impassioned defense of white supremacy. This defense meant conformity of opinion, and at that, Smith balked. Three weeks before the school vote, she warned her readers that, “No one would live for long in this country in a community where suspicion and distrust, hatred and intolerance held sway. No person in his right mind would live in such a community if he could help himself.” She pointed out that millions under the domination of Soviet Russia lacked the freedoms that Americans had. Smith reminded her readers that ideally, America was a place where people of all faiths and ideas could find toleration. Smith surmised in her December 9 column that everyone wanted segregated

⁵⁴ Ibid., 18 November, 23 December 1954

schools, and thus the *Brown* decision posed a major problem for the South. Yet, she said she was confident that people could find a solution.⁵⁵

Smith's journalistic duality over Jim Crow segregation revealed itself in a variety of events in 1955. In January, she reported about charges of discrimination brought against Walter Strider, the head of the local Farmers Home Association (FHA) bureau. The FHA was a federal program that gave low interest housing loans to qualified applicants. According to Smith's account, some local African Americans had charged Strider with denying their applications because they had taken part in some local civil rights organizing. Strider claimed all qualified applicants received loans and that his office denied only four black petitioners. Smith reported that Medgar Evers, the Mississippi Field Secretary for the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP), had passed on the affidavits claiming discrimination to the federal government. Once again, many of Smith's readers did not appreciate her reporting racial incidents that put county leaders in an unfavorable light.⁵⁶

On the opposite end of the spectrum, Smith opined in June 1955 that the NAACP was only fomenting trouble by persisting on integration. She prophesied that the lawsuits fostered by *Brown* would take years to litigate. She ridiculed the notion of forced integration in places like Holmes County. She wrote, "The United State Supreme Court has made its decision-but it cannot enforce it. The Negroes of the South can never win by force what the white people don't give them readily and freely." She concluded that the only reasonable solution lay in negotiation and equalization. She stated, "The best

⁵⁵ Ibid., 2, 9 December 1954.

⁵⁶ Ibid., 27 January 1955.

thing members of both races can do is to work for and toward equalized schools, better schools for both races to the end that the entire South can bring its schools up to the standards enjoyed in other sections of the country.”⁵⁷

For the vast majority of whites in Holmes, maintaining racial integrity stood as the key concern, not school standardization. Any white person that even mildly appeared to threaten the racial status quo came under attack. Thus, Smith was not the only white person in Holmes County to be accused of breaching this protocol in 1954 and 1955. White leaders had not forgotten Dr. David Minter and his support of Smith at her libel trial. On September 30, 1955, Minter and Eugene Cox received a summons to appear before an inquisition of over 700 county residents to explain their activities on the farm. A few days prior, three young black men supposedly made suggestive comments to a young white teenage girl at a bus stop near the town of Tchula. The young girl informed her bus driver who in turn informed Sheriff Byrd. After making inquiries, Byrd arrested the three young men. The sheriff informed county attorney Pat Barrett, state representative Edgar Love, and William Moses. Moses was a prominent Lexington car dealer and president of the county chapter of the Citizens’ Council. The other men were also members of the organization. They interrogated the black teenagers and taped their conversation. It turned out that one of the young men lived near Providence Farm. This gave the men the opportunity to inquire into the goings on at Providence. It also gave Byrd an opportunity for payback since Dr. Minter had testified at the Byrd-Smith libel trial earlier in the year.⁵⁸

⁵⁷ Ibid., 9 June 1955.

⁵⁸ Bill Miller, “Trial by Tape Recorder,” *New York Reporter*, 16 September 1955

Byrd and his cohorts asked the young men what had happened at the bus stop, but quickly moved to their ultimate purpose. They asked the young men if they knew about the goings on at Providence. The white officials pressed the teenagers on whether or not they had seen interracial swimming at the farm's pond. Sensing a way of escape, one of the young men claimed to see that very thing. This confession was all the white officials needed to mount an attack on Minter and Cox.⁵⁹

This incident has to be seen in the context of what else was going on in Mississippi in 1955. The state had made national headlines in the summer of 1955 with the killing of Emmett Till, a 14-year-old black teenager from Chicago who had visited relatives in Money, a small community in Leflore County, just north of Holmes County. While in Money, Till went into a country store owned by Roy Bryant and his wife Carolyn. Bryant's wife later claimed that Till squeezed her hand and made a pass at her. Her husband was not in the store at the time of the incident. That night, Bryant and his half-brother, J.W. Milam, abducted Till from the home of his uncle, Mose Wright. Bryan and Milam beat Till, shot him, attached a cotton gin fan around his neck, and flung his body into the Sunflower River. Local officials later discovered the bloated and disfigured body. Bryant and Milan were tried in the small town of Sumner, and the national media covered the proceedings. Despite Mose Wright bravely standing up in court and pointing out that Milan and Bryant were the men who abducted his nephew, an all-white jury found Milan and Bryan not guilty. With no threat of double jeopardy, they later confessed to the murders in an interview that appeared in *Look* magazine. The Holmes

⁵⁹ Ibid., "Trial by Tape Recorder," *New York Reporter*, 16 September 1955.

County incident with the young black men and the white girl at the bus stop took place the same week the jury returned the Till verdict.⁶⁰

Byrd and the other officials summoned Minter and Cox to come to a meeting at the Tchula public school gymnasium on the night of September 30. Seven hundred people attended the meeting. Love played the taped interrogation of the boys and told the crowd that something had to be done to “avoid another Till killing.” With Minter and Cox seated before the crowd, Love asked them personal questions and their philosophy at Providence. He asked Cox and Minter if either had ties to the Communist Party. Cox denied the accusation and pointed out that neither he nor Minter had appeared on any Congressional lists of known Communists. Both men argued that they abided by the social norms of segregation, but Minter admitted that he thought segregation was unchristian. Cox offered his opinion that segregation would not end soon but would eventually cease to exist. To most in the crowd, the men had given enough evidence that they were unfit to stay in the county because they threatened the racial status quo. When Love asked for a show of hands for or against their leaving the county, only two hands went up in opposition. One of these was Marsh Calloway, the minister of the Presbyterian Church of Durant. He stood up and told the crowd that he had known David Minter for several years and that he certainly was no Communist. He also chastised the crowd for acting unchristian and undemocratically. Within a week of his vocal

⁶⁰ See Stephen J. Whitefield, *A Death in the Delta: The Story of Emmett Till* (New York: Free Press, 1988); John Dittmer, *Local People: The Struggle for Civil Rights in Mississippi*, (Urbana, Illinois: University of Illinois Press, 1995), 55-58.

opposition at the meeting, the elders of the Durant Presbyterian Church voted to dismiss Calloway.⁶¹

Minter and Cox remained in the county for less than year. Whites at the official and unofficial level squeezed them in every way possible. Sheriff Byrd conducted roadblocks at the entrance to the farm and interrogated vendors and others who tried to call on the farm. The farm's insurance was revoked. Minter and Cox and their families had to endure harassing phone calls. One caller even threatened to burn down the Minter's home. Black and white patrons stopped coming to the clinic. By the summer of 1956, the farm closed. Minter and his family moved to Arizona, and Cox moved to Memphis, Tennessee.⁶²

This kind of backlash cowed even Smith. She attended the meeting at Tchula, but did not mention it in the *Lexington Advertiser*. She reported the firing of Calloway in the Durant News, but made no editorial comment. A week after the Tchula meeting, she admitted in her column that Byrd's libel victory had intimidated her into being more circumspect with her words. In her October 6, 1955 column celebrating National Newspaper Week, she reminded her readers of the necessity of a free press. She argued that all of America's basic freedoms depended first on a free press. It was the press who bravely defended the people's right to know and kept them from "being ground under the heels of a tyrant or dictator." Those that wanted to silence the press wanted to "keep

⁶¹ Bill Miller, "Trial by Tape Recorder," *New York Reporter*, 16 September 1955

⁶² Will D. Campbell, *Providence* (Waco, Tx: Baylor Univ. Press, 2002), 6-15, 287, Jeffery B. Howell, "Providence Farm and Its Doomed Attempt at Racial Reconciliation in Holmes County," *The Undiscovered Country: The Civil Rights Movement in Holmes County, Mississippi 1954-1968* (Masters Thesis, Mississippi State University, 2005), 6-34. James Silver, *Mississippi: The Closed Society* (New York: Harcourt, Brace, & World, 1964), 37-41; James Cobb, *The Most Southern Place on Earth: The Mississippi Delta and the Roots of Regional Identity* (New York: Oxford Press, 1992), 218-222.

people in the dark.” Then she confessed, “Sometimes the press is compelled to operate temporarily under wraps. Sometimes it is harassed and hamstrung by lawsuits and otherwise intimidated.” Bootleggers couldn’t intimidate her, but white the backlash against *Brown* and anyone who appeared to threaten the racial status quo had frightened her and forced her to be less bold in her pronouncements.⁶³

A couple weeks later Smith put on the front page an article that covered a speech given to the Lexington Rotary Club by Jim Eastland, the senior U.S. Senator from Mississippi. A wealthy planter from Sunflower County in the Mississippi Delta, Eastland argued that Mississippi needed an organization “to give the facts on the racial situation” in the state. Eastland went to call for Mississippi and the South to reclaim their sovereignty and peacefully and legally resist the *Brown* decision. In Eastland’s mind, groups like the NAACP were dupes of Communist agents. In her own column that addressed Eastland’s comments, Smith said, “With Senator Eastland we heartily agree.” She argued that it would benefit the state to have an organization that promoted Mississippi’s interests and tell their side of the story. This organization, called the Mississippi Sovereignty Commission, did produce propaganda supporting Mississippi, but in reality, its main goal was to spy on and denigrate any group or individual that it saw as a threat to the racial status quo. Ironically, the very organization that Smith supported eventually turned its investigative lens and fury on her.⁶⁴

⁶³ Lexington *Advertiser*, 6 October 1955.

⁶⁴ Ibid., 20 October 1955; See Yasuhiro Katagiri, *The Mississippi State Sovereignty Commission: Civil Rights and States' Rights* (Jackson, Mississippi: University Press of Mississippi, 2001); Jenny Irons, *Reconstituting Whiteness: The Mississippi State Sovereignty Commission* (Nashville: Vanderbilt University Press, 2010).

While Smith had made enemies of much of the white establishment and Sheriff Byrd, the Mississippi State Supreme Court vindicated her editorial stand by overturning the libel verdict in November of 1955. In *Hazel Brannon Smith v. Richard F. Byrd*, the court ruled that Smith's papers had "substantially recited the circumstances" truthfully concerning the assault and shooting of Henry Randle. Based on the facts of the case, the court ruled that Byrd had no justification for striking or shooting Randle. Thus, Smith was not guilty of libel. In her November 10, 1955 column, Smith took the opportunity afforded by the victory to defend herself as well explain where she stood. She wrote, "I am a firm believer in our Southern traditions and racial segregation, but not at the expense of justice and truth." This succinct declaration gave insight into the difference between Smith and the growing white resistance. She believed the *Brown* decision was wrong as did her readers. She believed in the Jim Crow hierarchy as did her neighbors, but she did not believe in using intimidation, violence, and subterfuge to maintain it. She remained consistent with her editorial views of the 1940s. On the other hand, the establishment and environment around her grew more and more insular and reactionary. She refused to be a shill for the White Citizens' Council and its agenda, and thus found herself more and more under attack. *Time* magazine took notice of her victory calling her "the conscience of the county." This would serve as a pattern in her career for the next fifteen years. National media sources applauded her journalistic courage while locals deemed her as a traitor and a pariah.⁶⁵

⁶⁵ Arthur J. Kaul, "Hazel Brannon Smith and the *Lexington Advertiser*," in David Davies, ed., *The Press and Race: Mississippi Journalists Confront the Movement* (Jackson, Ms.: University Press of Mississippi, 2001), 243, *Lexington Advertiser*, 10 November 1955; "The Last Word," *Time*, 66, 21 November 1955.

With the freedom to speak more openly, she wrote a few weeks later about the controversy surrounding David Minter, Eugene Cox, and Marsh Calloway. She reported Calloway's response to the grilling of Minter and Cox, noting that the minister called it "un-American and un-Christian." She pointed out that many members of the congregation acknowledged that Calloway believed in segregation. In fact, Calloway had once been a member of the Ku Klux Klan. But in the fallout surrounding *Brown*, a former Klansman and segregationist espousing minister could not be tolerated if he questioned the actions of the white establishment. The members of the Presbyterian Church of Durant voted 43-0 for Calloway's dismissal. More than likely, the county's leaders, (all members of the Citizens' Council) would have liked to put Smith on the same kind of hot seat they placed Minter, Cox, and Calloway on, but Smith had deeper pockets and the only significant newspapers in the county. Their attack on her would take several years and had to be more indirect.⁶⁶

Once the popular crusader, Smith's status in the county had drastically changed by the end of 1955. She still had many supporters, but she reported in December of 1955 that she now had more "enemies" who spread rumors that she was responsible for the bad publicity the county had received in New York papers over the Cox, Minter, and Calloway controversy. She scoffed at the idea that she had any control over what other media sources published.⁶⁷

⁶⁶ Ibid., 24 November 1955; Calloway reference to being in the Ku Klux Klan found in Will Campbell, *Providence*, 288; See also James Graham Cook, *The Segregationists* (New York: Appleton-Century-Crofts, 1962), 42-43.

⁶⁷ *Lexington Advertiser*, 8 December 1955.

In fact, Smith had no problem with the White Citizens' Council and their ultimate goal, that of preventing integration. She denounced only their tactics, namely economic pressure and public intimidation. While the members of the Holmes County chapter viewed Smith as a threat, she thought of herself as providing rational suggestions for the organization to better fight the battle against *Brown*. In her December 1, 1955 column, she noted Senator Jim Eastland's televised speech before the Citizens' Council's annual meeting. Eastland voiced several strategies that Smith had already promoted, and thus she took the opportunity to plead for a rational response to the integration crisis. Smith, like Eastland, believed the South needed a regional organization to promote its interests. The editor believed that groups like the Citizens' Council needed to avoid violence and instead promote an agenda that garnered favorable public opinion, not just in the South but nationwide. Smith challenged the organization to take the lead in promoting the interests of Mississippi, but at the same time to be transparent in their actions and motives. She wrote:

We have felt from the beginning of the organization of the Citizens' Councils that such an organization, if it could enlist and retain support from the best leadership of the South could easily form the nucleus of a regional organization to tell the cause of the South to the nation. We felt from the first, and expressed ourselves thus to the leaders of the Holmes County Citizens' Councils that the full story of the purpose and motives of the organization should be told from the beginning to the citizens of the county and state.⁶⁸

For Smith, the Citizens' Council could have led the way by trying to promote good will and cooperation among like-minded whites and blacks. This in turn would have encouraged aid from national legislators. She wrote,

⁶⁸ Ibid., 1 December 1955.

Our elected congressmen and senators can be working on a program of constitutional reform-the enactment of an amendment giving the states control of their domestic affairs to such an extent that no Supreme Court in the future will be able to promulgate law by decree-as happened in May 1954.⁶⁹

The reality, however, in December of 1955 was very different that what she proposed. African Americans in Mississippi faced violence and intimidation if they stepped outside of the status quo. Till had been murdered in the summer. In the community of Belzoni, just east of Holmes County, Gus Courts, a black grocer and president of his local NAACP chapter, discovered that the local bank had cut off his credit because of his civil rights activities. He received death threats as well. He was forced to abandon his role as local NAACP president. Other blacks involved in business also faced an economic squeeze and threats if they engaged in civil rights agitation. Reverend George Lee of Belzoni paid the ultimate price in the spring of 1955. Lee owned a printing shop, served as the Vice President for the Regional Council of Negro Leadership, and worked alongside Courts in the NAACP. One night in May 1955, Lee was driving down a Belzoni street when a car suddenly pulled up beside him. The occupants opened fire upon Lee's car. Shot in the face, Lee lost control of his vehicle and crashed into a home. He later died in an ambulance on the way to hospital. The Jackson *Clarion Ledger* reported the next day Lee died in an "odd accident." Courts himself was later ambushed in a like manner, but he survived his wounds. He fled to Chicago and aided by the NAACP, resumed his grocery business.⁷⁰

⁶⁹ Ibid., 1 December 1955.

⁷⁰ John Dittmer, *Local People*, 53-54.

Smith denounced this atmosphere of violence and intimidation. She stressed that white Mississippians needed to be focusing on was rational discussion, promoting good will among the races, and obedience to the law. She had personally felt the pressure to keep quiet, and she condemned this growing climate of oppression. She wrote,

People are afraid to speak their minds because of the fear of being misunderstood and put on the wrong side of the fence. This should not be the case. In this land of freedom no one should be afraid of speaking an honest opinion. And everyone should be free to agree or disagree.”⁷¹

In Smith’s mind, the pressure put on her did not arise primarily from the issue of race, instead it originated from her decade long attack on illegal alcohol. In her last column of the year, she celebrated the failure of Sheriff Richard Byrd’s attorneys’ failure to sway the Supreme Court to overthrow her appeal. Smith argued that the “race issue” had been interjected into the crusade she had led against Byrd. Thus she lost the initial libel case, not because of her reporting, but because bootleggers had spread fear and rumors about her concerning the rising racial tensions. She did not say what these rumors were, but one of these had been that Smith entertained a black person in her home for dinner. To her, these kinds of rumors were “monstrous,” and it would have been “degrading” to publish them on the front page. She admitted that the libel verdict had silenced her for fourteen months and allowed the bootleggers to run wide open again. Smith said her sources told her that whiskey was flowing all over the county, and that clubs were employing at least 300 slot machines. She looked forward to the new sheriff taking office and re-igniting the campaign against bootleggers winning the appeal in the state Supreme Court gave her renewed confidence in speaking out. She

⁷¹ *Lexington Advertiser*, 15 December 1955.

promised, “But this should be taken as a fair warning that never again will we fail to act should that Hitler-like technique be employed against us again-on any issue.” She avowed her loved for Holmes County and stressed that she did not want to hurt it with bad publicity, “but we will not in the future sit silently by while any individual or group attacks us unfairly.⁷²

Smith failed to see, however, her moderate approach to the integration crisis was not the path that the white establishment wanted to follow. For them, moderation meant capitulation. Because she refused to conform and rabidly support segregation whatever method used, Smith only increased the number of enemies who wanted to do whatever feasible to silence her voice. She would feel their fury in the coming year.

⁷² Ibid., 29 December 1955. The rumor that Smith entertained an African American for dinner can be found in Jim Bishop’s interview with Smith in his article, “Thunder Over Dixie” *Mansfield Ohio News-Journal*, 29 March 1956.

CHAPTER V

“WHEN MODERATE BECAME A DIRTY WORD,” THE FIGHT FOR ECONOMIC SURVIVAL

“Oh no, I’m not talking anymore. You know what mister? I don’t even know if we can stay here.” Hazel Brannon Smith (1956)

“Mrs. Smith does not reflect the thinking of most of the white people of the county at a time when solidarity of opinion is needed to preserve the Southern way of life.” *Holmes County Herald* Stockholder (1958)

Like a magnet is attracted to steel, Hazel Brannon Smith was attracted to controversy. During the editor’s first two decades (1936-1954) in Holmes County, her foundational belief in the freedom to speak her mind had at times alarmed her readers. In 1936, she was convinced that a venereal disease epidemic was raging across the county. Even though it mostly affected the black community and was not considered the proper topic for a respectable white lady, she spoke up. In the mid-1940s, the young editor took aim at brazen bootleggers and malfeasant sheriffs. She thought illegal booze and the poisonous atmosphere it bred threatened the safety and reputation of the county. She also took aim at the federal government and in her view, its meddling in southern customs concerning race. Between 1952 and 1954, she aimed her editorial guns at Sheriff Richard Byrd. The editor criticized the sheriff for his perceived duplicitousness concerning the spread of the illegal liquor trade and for his growing reputation as an abuser of African Americans. Smith’s criticism of Byrd for shooting an unarmed black man in July 1954

brought the sheriff's wrath and a libel suit. The shooting occurred only two months after the Supreme Court issued the *Brown* decision. Though Byrd won a libel verdict, the decision was overturned in late 1955. Smith reminded her readers in November 1955, "I am a firm believer in our Southern traditions and racial segregation, but not at the expense of justice and truth." A proponent of white supremacy, she still felt it her duty to denounce police brutality based on race. Though controversial, Smith had remained popular. She kept most of her readers and the majority of her advertising.¹

Smith's status in the community dramatically began to change by late 1955 and into 1956. Because she refused to keep quiet in the name of massive resistance and because she had won her appeal against the Byrd libel decision, the editor outraged the majority of the county's leadership, all of whom belonged to Citizens' Council. Smith had remained pretty consistent with her views even though she did not see the inconsistency between upholding law and order and the basic inequity of Jim Crow. County leaders, on the other hand, were up in arms over the changes inherent in the application of *Brown*. Many in the county and the state were willing to use whatever overt or covert actions necessary to maintain racial segregation. Smith balked at these, and thus she came to be seen as an irritant that needed to be neutralized. The problem for her detractors was that Smith served as the major outlet for news in the county. Thus, they began to look for ways to punish her for her refusal to play along. The white leadership ultimately began plans to completely put her out of business. These attempts did frighten and dismay the editor, but they did not silence her. Instead, the

¹ *Lexington Advertiser*, 10 November 1955.

scandalization made her fight even harder for her civil liberties. This only further marginalized her from the community that once sang her praises.²

The first salvo against the editor came with a rumor that her husband's job was in jeopardy. Hazel Brannon met Walter D. Smith on a Caribbean cruise in late 1949. Smith served as the ship's Purser. The couple subsequently fell in love and married in March 1950. Born in Philadelphia, Pennsylvania in 1916, Walter Smith was two years younger than his bride. He earned a Bachelor of Science in Education from Arizona State University in 1940, and a Masters of Arts degree in Audio Visual Education in 1941. He employed his visual arts training in the Army Air Force during World War II, even spending time on the Manhattan Project, performing special photographic projects on the Atomic Bomb. Within a year of their marriage, Smith got a job as the administrator of the Holmes County Hospital in 1951. He served in that capacity for five years. With Hazel Brannon Smith's willingness to challenge the establishment status quo, it did not help her cause that her husband was a "Yankee" and an outsider. Upon hearing the rumor that he might lose his job, Walter Smith and his wife both tried to head the attempt off. In January 1956, the *Lexington Advertiser* published a front page letter by Smith where he defended his five-year performance as the hospital administrator. He charged that a group was trying to pressure the hospital board to fire him. He asked for the new members of the board to take the time to check out his record before making a

² Neil R. McMillen, *The Citizens' Council: Organized Resistance to the Second Reconstruction 1954-1965* (Urbana, Illinois: University of Illinois Press, 1971, 1994), 27-28, 31, notes that Mississippi counties that contained an African American population over 50% had the largest membership in Citizens' Council chapters. Counties with lesser black populations but significant civil rights activity also saw an increase in Citizens' Council activity.

hasty decision. Most of the hospital staff affirmed Walter Smith's job performance by signing a petition that called for the hospital to keep him as administrator.³

Hazel Brannon Smith knew that her husband's possible termination came because of her editorial stance. She heard from a reporter from *Jackson Daily News* that one of the board members of the hospital admitted to ulterior motives for wanting to fire Walter Smith. The reporter noted that many on the hospital board wanted to get rid of their administrator because "his wife has become a controversial figure."⁴

Smith tried to defend herself and her editorial policy to her readers, and hoped to deflect the collateral damage that was about to be inflicted upon her husband. As she had done throughout her career, she portrayed herself as a servant of the community. That meant publishing all the news in order for the public to be able to make informed decisions. She wrote, "We have tried to the best of our limited ability to serve the best interest of our community, county, and state in every way possible and a not to dodge or side-step issues." She uttered regret for inadvertently stepping on some toes, but stressed that she held no grudges. Obviously, Sheriff Richard Byrd disagreed with that statement. Looking back to her decade long struggle against bootleggers, Smith stressed that the attack on her was led by "those who want Holmes County to be run wide open-with bootlegging and gambling permitted and we have been told they will do anything they can to try to hurt us." Smith argued that she was trying to promote the kind of

³*Lexington Advertiser*, 5 January 1956. Information about the Smith wedding found in the *Lexington Advertiser*, 23 March 1950, see also John Whalen, *Maverick Under the Magnolias: The Hazel Brannon Smith Story* (USA: Xlibris Press, 2000), 64-65.

⁴ *Ibid.*, 12 January 1956; *Jackson Daily News* 6 January 1956.

community that young people could prosper in, and she felt that the majority of her readers were with her.⁵

The Smith's defense fell on deaf ears because the Holmes County Hospital Board fired Walter Smith the next week. While the editor may have wanted to believe the pressure on her husband came from the bootlegging cabal, it seems obvious that the attack came because she questioned the establishment's methods in protecting Jim Crow segregation.⁶

Smith was not without influential friends, but they too were considered controversial. Editor Hodding Carter, Jr. stood as a staunch supporter of his Holmes County colleague. Carter came to Mississippi from Louisiana in 1934, a couple of years before the Smith arrived. He ran the *Delta Democrat Times* in the Mississippi River town of Greenville, ninety miles northwest of Holmes County. Carter, like Smith, viewed segregation with favor while at the same time castigated the intimidation and violence that stood as the only acceptable white response in post-*Brown* Mississippi. Carter demonstrated a spirit of moderation long before *Brown*. It won him national fame with a Pulitzer Prize in 1946 for a series of editorials that denounced "racial, religious, and economic intolerance." One editorial in particular, entitled "Go for Broke" called for more humane treatment toward Japanese Americans whose sons had fought for the United States during World War II and were returning home.⁷

⁵ *Lexington Advertiser*, 5 January 1956.

⁶ *Ibid.*, 12 January 1956; *Jackson Daily News* 6 January 1956.

⁷ Ginger Rudeseal Carter, "Hodding Carter" in David R. Davies, ed. *The Press and Race: Mississippi Journalists Confront the Movement* (Jackson, Mississippi: University Press of Mississippi), 274; In the vote, thirty-two legislator abstained.

Carter himself came under the attack of the Citizens' Council and the state legislature in the months after *Brown*. In March 1955, Carter published a piece in *Look* magazine entitled "A Wave of Terrorism Threatens the South," in which he blasted the resurgence of terrorist groups like the Ku Klux Klan and their use of violence and fear against African Americans who were pushing for civil rights. Carter's article so incensed the Mississippi House of Representatives that they voted 89-19 to admonish him. The legislators blasted Carter's article and charged the editor with lying about Mississippi and the South. Carter retorted with an editorial blasting the eighty-nine legislators. He stated that if he had lied, then he was well qualified to serve in the state house. "So to even things up I herewith resolve by a vote of 1 to 0 that there are 89 liars in the State Legislature," he wrote. He concluded by saying he hoped the racial extremism that gripped places like Mississippi would soon dissipate, but until then "those 89 character mobbers can go to hell collectively or singly and wait until I back down. They needn't plan on returning." Carter not only castigated the state legislature, he also denounced the growing power behind politics in Mississippi, the Citizens' Council. Carter described the organization as the "uptown Klan."⁸

Upon Walter Smith's dismissal, Carter defended the Smiths in an editorial. Yet, Carter's support cut both ways. The Greenville editor's praise brought encouragement and peer validation to Smith, but it also tabbed her as even more controversial in the eyes of many of her readers. In the editorial, Carter argued that Holmes County was "getting

⁸ Ibid., "Hodding Carter," 278-279; editorial quote Ann Waldron, *Hodding Carter: The Reconstruction of a Racist* (Chapel Hill, NC: Algonquin Books, 1993), 246; "Uptown Klan" reference found in James Silver, *Mississippi: The Closed Society* (Jackson, Mississippi: University Press of Mississippi, 1964, 2012), 36; Carter also wrote a chapter about Smith, "Woman Editor's War on Bigots" in his book *First Person Rural* (Garden City, NY: Doubleday 1963), 217-223.

even” for Smith winning her appeal of the Byrd libel verdict. Carter said that Walter Smith had not been fired because of incompetence, but because his wife “had the guts to criticize the then sheriff for shooting a Negro in the back for no good reason.” According to Carter, one did not get away with such actions in Holmes County. So if the state Supreme Court would not punish her, then someone or some group, i.e. the hospital board, made sure they did. Carter concluded, “The pettiness of mind that produces such pressures [sic] becoming more apparently typical of Holmes County.”⁹

Ironically, Smith received some public vindication at the same time she was developing a reputation as an outlier concerning race. Smith’s feud with Sheriff Byrd had originated not over his treatment of African Americans, but with his lack of law enforcement in regards to the liquor laws. By law, a Mississippi sheriff could not serve two consecutive terms. Thus, in January of 1956, Andrew Smith (no relation) took over as the new sheriff. This delighted Hazel Brannon Smith. As a candidate, Andrew Smith promised to crack down on bootlegging. He had a good personal reason to do so. Eddie Noel shot him in the face while escaping a manhunt following a booze-related scuffle back in January 1954. During his first two weeks in office, the new sheriff cracked down hard on illegal drinking establishments. The *Lexington Advertiser* reported that the new sheriff raided seven juke joints and forced many of the bootleggers to clear out of the county. Also, the once ubiquitous slot machines disappeared. Throughout the next four years, the sheriff kept his promises to make enforcement of the prohibition laws a top priority. In an April 1957 column, Hazel Brannon Smith lauded the sheriff for his commitment and wrote in her personal column, “We love you Andrew!” This

⁹ Greenville *Delta Democrat-Times*, 11 January 1956.

vindication from her decade's long crusade brought little comfort for the editor and did little to change the public's perception of her. While many of her readers agreed with her stance over bootleg liquor, her refusal to bend to the dictates of the white establishment, and more specifically the Citizens' Council, put her on the outside of what was considered acceptable behavior. The firing of Walter Smith would be one of many salvos the white establishment would fire at her to diminish her influence and presence in the county.¹⁰

Despite the growing pressure, Smith continued to plow what she considered a moderate path in regards to maintaining racial segregation while many of her neighbors and journalistic peers beat the drum for racial extremism. In a March 1956 column, she chastised the daily racial harangues of the two largest papers in the state, the *Jackson Daily News* and the *Jackson Clarion Ledger*. She said these publications only stirred up harsh feelings and served no constructive purpose. Owned by the Hederman family, the two Jackson papers diligently rallied support against integration throughout the 1950s and 1960s. They stood as the opinion shapers for many Mississippians. By the early 1960s, with the emergence of the civil rights movement, the Hederman papers earned national ridicule as continual purveyors of "unabashed prejudice."¹¹

An example from the pen of Major Fred Sullens, the editor of the *Jackson Daily News* is sufficient to demonstrate the papers' dedication to maintaining white supremacy.

¹⁰ *Lexington Advertiser*, 12 January 1956, 11 April 1957.

¹¹ *Ibid.*, 1 March 1956; David R. Davies and Judy Smith, "Jimmy Ward and the *Jackson Daily News*" in David Davies, ed., *The Press and Race: Mississippi Journalists Confront the Movement* (Jackson, Ms.: University Press of Mississippi, 2001), 86-87.

In early 1956, Sullens wrote a retort to a Boston critic who had called white southerners racists. Sullens embraced the charge. He wrote,

We surely are. A racist, as we see the word, is a person who approves his own race and prefers the society of his own people. Being a racist merely means you want to preserve the bloodstream purity of your own race. The racist is rational, reasonable, and wholly normal when he demands the right to keep the company of his own kind. Yes, we are racists, and need not offer apology to anybody so being.¹²

Sullens went on to argue that the white South was “being assailed today by sinister forces,” and “being maligned, abused, and grossly slandered by the NAACP and White Negroophiles who want to use the Negro vote for their own purposes.” Thus for Sullens, white Mississippians needed to be courageous and decisive in responding to the *Brown* decision. He rejected neutrality or moderation and wrote, “This is no time for haggling, vain disputations, or legal technicalities.”¹³

Chastising other papers for racial extremism did not mean that Smith disagreed with their basic premise that integration was wrong. In a March 1956 column, Smith again denounced integration and stated, “We do not believe in mixing the races in our schools, churches, social life or anywhere else...and we regard interracial marriage as something rejected by God...else why would He have made more than one race?” She continued,

But we know that the Negro is a human being created by God just as we are and we believe he is entitled to fair treatment. If he is given equal opportunity to education, a plan Mississippi has already committed itself to, then more economic opportunities will open up to him in the future.¹⁴

¹² Frederick Sullens, *Jackson Daily News*, 19 January 1956, quoted in David R. Davies “Jimmy Ward and the *Jackson Daily News*,” 87.

¹³ *Ibid.*, 87.

¹⁴ *Lexington Advertiser*, 1 March 1956.

That being said, she urged leaders to make the effort to promote better relations between white and black southerners, especially in regards to fair treatment in the courts. If this was done, “then we will be making a contribution on the constructive side of race relations.”¹⁵

Whites in Holmes County eschewed this more temperate path. In April 1956, Smith reported on the county wide Citizens’ Council rally held in Lexington. W.M. Caskey, Professor of Political Science at Mississippi College in Clinton, was the featured speaker. Caskey attacked Mississippi moderates, namely editor Hodding Carter, Jr., and famed Mississippi novelist William Faulkner. Caskey charged that men like Carter and Faulkner “along with other fence straddlers” were “selling the South’s heritage for a mess of porridge.” The Professor went on to charge that “communist influences” directed the NAACP and stressed that God was the original segregationist. He urged “passive resistance” on the part of the Citizens’ Council and stated that the group must “win without violence but win we must” to prevent triumph by the NAACP and mongrelization. To most whites Mississippians, Smith bore the brand of “fence straddler” and served as a threat to “the South’s heritage.” Caskey’s comments mirrored those of Judge Tom Brady, the philosophical founder of the Citizens’ Council. In regards to the defense of white supremacy, Brady denounced moderates. He said that a moderate was one “who is going to let a little sewage under the door.” Smith rejected integration but

¹⁵ Ibid., 1 March 1956.

pleaded for moderation and constraint. For many of her readers, moderation became a dirty word.¹⁶

In the post *Brown* South, those in the white community who urged restraint found themselves on an every increasingly treacherous road. As Jason Morgan Ward points out, white leaders in the South rejected the notion of civil rights for African Americans long before *Brown*. After the decision came down, the pressure to conform only intensified exponentially. Smith's moderation seems not so reasonable today, but in 1956, it bordered on the radical. *Brown* posed a direct threat to the southern way of life. The wagons had to be circled and the cause defended. Thus, Smith's advice of reasoned restraint reeked of surrender and defeat.¹⁷

In his book, *The South Strikes Back*, Hodding Carter III, who worked with his father at the at the Greenville *Delta Democrat-Times* and later took over as editor in 1962, detailed the dilemma that whites like Smith faced when they questioned the tactics of groups like the Citizens' Council. He wrote,

The moderate became first an isolated figure, then more and more the subject of comprehensive efforts to silence him. Just as in any area at war, the white South's majority had no need or respect or tolerance for neighbors who did not believe wholeheartedly in its efforts. Those who spoke out in opposition were pasted with labels of "traitor" and "nest-fouler," "Red," and "nigger lover" and coveter of "Yankee dollars." The device was greatly effective.¹⁸

¹⁶ *Lexington Advertiser*, 19 April 1956. Tom Brady, quoted in George Thayer, *The Farther Shore of Politics: The American Political Fringe Today* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 1967), 121.

¹⁷ Jason Morgan Ward, *Defending White Democracy: The Making of a Segregationist Movement & the Remaking of Racial Politics, 1936-1965* (Chapel Hill, NC: University of North Carolina Press, 2011), 1-2.

¹⁸ Hodding Carter III, *The South Strikes Back* (New York: Doubleday, 1959), 18.

Smith referred to this tactic in an April 26, 1956 column. She wrote about teachers in the Colorado public schools who were being smeared by rumors that they were communists. She noted that the Colorado Board of Education demanded accusations in writing before an investigation could take place. Smith agreed that subversion needed to be investigated but denounced rumors and name calling without evidence. She opined that the practice of tabbing someone or something “you happen to not like or agree with a Communist or Communism_is irresponsible and would never be practiced by any informed honest individual.” She argued that many people in leadership positions in the country had labeled other citizens as communist without any proof. She concluded, “We should remember that when we engage in name calling without proof we ourselves are employing the methods of the Communists-our nation as a whole receives no good from it and lives and reputations are wrecked by it.” Reading between the lines, Smith was not primarily referring to the Colorado situation as much as her own. Since the Byrd trial, she had had to endure all kinds of rumors about her character and her motives and her livelihood was being threatened. In 1954 she had said that sometimes the innocent got hurt in the war to ferret out communists in the U.S. Her tune had changed now that her enemies were tagging her as a radical.¹⁹

National journalist Jim Bishop revealed the pressures that Smith was facing. He traveled across the South in 1956 investigating the reaction to possibility of desegregation. His published ten articles under the title “Thunder Over Dixie.” In his second article, Bishop featured Smith and her struggle in Holmes County. He called Lexington a “little place of knotted hatred” and noted the silent stares he got from whites

¹⁹ *Lexington Advertiser*, 26 April 1956.

and blacks alike. He was an obvious outsider, someone neither group would welcome or converse with. He described Smith as having “Brown curly hair, china blue eyes which can ream a pine board at 20 paces, a big full figured woman who has hit hard in the fight of racial justice and who has been hit hard in turn.” Bishop detailed the struggles that Smith faced, many of which she had only hinted at in her own columns.²⁰

Smith’s bold front in her editorials belied that fact that the backlash had frightened her. Bishop noted that upon meeting her, Smith replied, “Oh no, I’m not talking anymore. You know what mister? I don’t even know if we can stay here.” Yet, Smith told Bishop about her troubles since the Byrd incident. The hospital had fired her husband. Advertising had fallen off greatly. During the libel trial, rumors had swirled around Smith, one being that she was a dreaded “Nigger lover.” After Byrd had won the lawsuit, she and her husband had fled the state and headed west for some time of recovery. Bishop noted that many of Smith’s editorials made her readers “grind their teeth,” but they read them just the same. There were no other outlets for news in the county. This would become the focal point of attack for her enemies in the county.²¹

Bishop zeroed in on the irony in Smith’s predicament. Ardent segregationists attacked her even though she openly opposed *Brown* and the attempt to desegregate schools in the South. Smith revealed that she held the same racist attitudes as her readers. She told Bishop that black children should have their own schools because they were not fit to be in white schools. In Smith’s mind, integration was “going to be bad” for black and white kids. She said, “Can’t you understand that Negro children are not ready for

²⁰ Jim Bishop, “Thunder Over Dixie,” Mansfield Ohio *News-Journal*, 29 March 1956.

²¹ *Ibid.*, 29 March 1956.

this? Can't you understand it? They hate school. They have no culture at home, no encouragement." In Smith's mind, her views were practical. She concluded that two-thirds of the students in an integrated school would be black in Holmes County, and these students would hold the white students behind. She urged Bishop to go interview black parents and see if any of them wanted integration. If so, she wanted to talk to them.²²

To Bishop, Smith's dilemma came because of her belief in justice. He said the Citizens' Council called her a "Nigger lover" and were wrong. A "Nigger lover" was someone "who bleeds incessantly for the poor downtrodden Negro." In Bishop's view, Smith was one who "would fight for anyone who has been wronged. The color doesn't matter. The church doesn't matter. The politics are of no consequence." He concluded, "Mrs. Smith has principles and a congenital inability to keep her typewriter shut." Yet, Bishop also zeroed in on the cost of Smith's stance when he wrote,

This is Hazel Brannon Smith, who at 41, is beginning to wonder if it isn't better to stop weeping in public every time a Negro is beaten or shot, and in that way protect her stake in the community: two newspapers, a Cadillac at the curb, a picture window home in the hills, two Irish setters who loved everybody and are color blind.²³

Bishop concluded the article with a description of the kind of atmosphere that permeated the county. After interviewing Smith, Bishop went to a local diner to go over his notes. He had eaten there earlier in the day. He noted the silent chill and looks that appraised him. It was clear that word had spread that the Yankee journalist was in town. As Bishop ate, Sheriff Andrew Smith and a Deputy came in. Bishop did not call Smith by name; he only used the description of "a fat sheriff." The sheriff and his deputy sat at

²² Ibid., 29 March 1956.

²³ Ibid., 29 March 1956.

the counter but turned and stared at Bishop until he packed up his things and left. Bishop surmised that in Holmes County “one is left with a feeling that God made all people equal but some a little more equal than others.”²⁴

Building on Bishop’s article, Carl Rowan, a black author and reporter, made some penetrating insights about Smith’s situation and context in Holmes County. In his 1957 book, *Go South to Sorrow*, Rowan noted that Smith got caught in the cross-hairs of whites angry over integration. He wrote,

When the mob that runs roughshod over the integrationist soon is drunk with the power that society hands it through silence and timidity, soon the mob runs roughshod even over a segregationist with whom it disagrees for some reason.²⁵

Rowan said that Smith misunderstood and underestimated the reaction of whites in Holmes County, “most of whom she knew on first-name intimacy.” Rowan also believed that Smith failed to realize “the degree to which the merchants of fear had succeeded in arousing white Mississippians to the ‘danger’ of Negroes taking over the state.”²⁶

Rowan demonstrated the dichotomy that Smith faced with her belief in journalistic integrity and yet at the same time living in a community that wanted conformity. Rowan said that many of her readers believed it was wrong for Sheriff Byrd to shoot a defenseless black man in the back, but it was even more wrong for Smith to take the side of a black man against the white sheriff. Byrd had produced a witness at the libel trial who had claimed to see a black person eat at Smith’s home, thus earning her the

²⁴ Ibid., 29 March 1956.

²⁵ Carl Rowan, *Go South to Sorrow* (New York: Random House, 1957), 183-187.

²⁶ Ibid., 183-187

title of “Nigger lover.” Thus Byrd, the “protector of the Anglo-Saxon race,” won vindication through the libel verdict.²⁷

While pointing out that Smith had faced a lot of pressure, Rowan made it clear that Smith still stood in a much better position than African Americans in Holmes County. His assertion was correct. Smith had a nice home, a Cadillac, and could flee the area for a time of respite after losing the libel verdict. Most African Americans in the county did not have the means to pay for an exit. Rowan was also more skeptical than Jim Bishop. Whereas Bishop had written in 1956 that Smith’s convictions would not allow her to remain silent, Rowan thought she would eventually mute her protest to protect her standing in the community. He urged her to keep writing and protesting against the brutality and intimidation, but he feared,

that this white woman who loves liberty also loves that house up in the hills, that car out front, those newspapers, even as the black man down the Delta loves his fatback and molasses-and we know she will return to Mississippi and become so lost among the white whisperers that perhaps even Richard Byrd will forget her.²⁸

In his evaluation, Rowan was both right and wrong about Smith. He correctly noted that she was at a crossroads. If she continued to speak out against racial injustice she faced the threat of losing her livelihood and all the accoutrements that came with it. He was wrong, however, concerning what she valued most and what she was willing to do to keep it. Smith obviously wanted to be valued in her community, and she did love the accoutrements that her profession brought; but she valued her calling as a journalist even

²⁷ Ibid., 183-187.

²⁸ Ibid., 183-187.

more. She did not leave Mississippi, she did not lose her editorial voice, and certainly, none of her readers forgot about her.

Even with all the pressure and the decreased revenues from dropped advertisers, Smith was able to keep thriving in 1956 because she had no significant competition. There was a small newspaper in the hamlet of Pickens, but her papers were still the only major news outlets. Thus, she printed what she thought was balanced news.

Smith's moderate path further enraged those who wanted silence or at least conformity of opinion. Smith again took this temperate route in late 1956. By this time the Mississippi State Sovereignty Commission had been formed in order to actively promote a positive image of Mississippi around the country. In October, the Sovereignty Commission invited journalists from several northern locales to come and investigate conditions in Mississippi. After visiting locales across the state, the reporters went back and published their accounts. Smith reprinted both positive and negative articles in her papers throughout the months of October and November.²⁹

Smith's willingness to reprint articles that criticized the Citizens' Council infuriated many white leaders and average readers. John Bond, reporter with the Rockland, Massachusetts *Standard*, pointed out that most whites in Mississippi were determined to keep segregation intact, and that meant silencing those who even hinted at dissent. Bond wrote that freedom of expression was "a hollow phrase in the magnolia state." He argued that African Americans wanted equal justice in the courts and greater economic opportunities and concluded that Mississippi contained thousands of black

²⁹ See Yasuhiro Katagiri, *The Mississippi State Sovereignty Commission: Civil Rights and States' Rights* (Jackson, Mississippi: University Press of Mississippi, 2001).

residents “with the intellect and inclination to vote who are denied that basic right of citizenship.”³⁰

Smith reprinted another Bond article on November 15, 1956. Bond pointed out that whites were willing to “defend the southern way of life” to the point of bloodshed. Bond told his readers that no substantial forms of dialogue existed between the white and black communities in Mississippi. African Americans had no say so in forming public opinion because they were not consulted. Again hammering at the lack of freedom of expression in Mississippi, Bond wrote,

There is only one side of the segregation question. No other point of view can be voiced publicly with safety. Particularly were we concerned with the methods of the Citizens’ Council which now claims an 11 state membership of 500,000 whites.³¹

Bond quoted one southern journalist who said the Citizens’ Council “was more insidious than Ku Klux Klan.” After running the articles, Smith concluded that the out-of-state reporters pointed out some positives in Mississippi but also many negatives. She concluded, “Difference of opinion was to be expected.” Yet, for most of her readers, difference of opinion was an anathema. Smith certainly did not ease any tensions she had with the white establishment by printing criticisms of Mississippi and more specifically, the Citizens’ Council.³²

Smith further violated racial taboos by commenting positively on black achievements in her column in December 1956. As David R. Davies points out, African Americans were basically invisible in the pages of most southern newspapers. He wrote,

³⁰ John Rockland’s article reprinted in the *Lexington Advertiser*, 8 November 1956.

³¹ *Ibid.*, 15 November 1956

³² *Ibid.*, 15 November 1956.

“By and large, blacks did not merit a mention in most white-owned newspapers unless they committed a crime or died a violent death.” Even though she firmly believed in segregation, this was Smith’s attempt at providing balanced news. She commented on a local black farmer named Matt Johnson. Johnson won first place in an agricultural contest for tenant farmers sponsored by the Memphis *Commercial Appeal* newspaper. Johnson received a \$50 cash prize at the Booker T. Washington High School in Memphis. In Smith’s mind, this was another opportunity to plug the local community. In response to Johnson’s prize, she reminded her readers that prosperous farmers were good for the community. While this positive mention more than likely pleased many in the black community of Holmes County, what most whites wanted was for Smith to write articles that called for blacks to be subservient and quiet and articles that praised white efforts to make sure these goals were accomplished.³³

During 1957, Smith found herself more ostracized, not just because of what of what she wrote, but also because of what friends and peers wrote about her. In February of 1957, the humanitarian group, the Fund of the Republic, awarded Hodding Carter, Jr., their American Traditions prize for a letter he wrote about Smith. In the letter, he praised Smith for “honoring the tradition of a free press.” The group gave Carter a \$500 cash prize and Smith a plaque. Smith put the announcement on the front page of her paper. She noted that the American Traditions project collected stories of individuals who had taken a stand for freedom of expression and the Bill of Rights in the face of pressure to conform to political expediency. To many in Holmes County, actions and awards like

³³ David Davies, “Introduction” in David R. Davies, ed., *The Press and Race: Mississippi Journalists Confront the Movement* (Jackson, Ms.: University Press of Mississippi, 2001), 5; *Lexington Advertiser*, 13 December 1956.

this served only to further cement the notion that Smith had moved outside mainstream thought on racial issues.³⁴

It did not help matters that Smith was not a traditional editor. Smith not only challenged the notion of a unified front in regards to race, she also challenged the traditional role most white southern men expected their women to take. Smith was an independent woman of means and used her position as a journalist to attack abuses wherever she found them. As long as she voiced the community line concerning race, she was appreciated by some, and tolerated by most. Yet, when she refused to be a mouthpiece for the Citizens' Council, this brought down the full force of establishment anger. Unlike Smith who was basically isolated in Holmes County, Hodding Carter had the backing of Greenville elites like William Alexander Percy, author of the famous book, *Lanterns of the Levy*. Carter underwent many of the same threats and pressures as Smith, but he retained a much greater financial base and a large cadre of support. Carter benefited also from Greenville's location on the Mississippi River and its greater experience with the outside world. Neil McMillen noted, "As the state's most progressive and urbane city, Greenville, despite its location in the conservative Delta region, was never a stronghold of the Citizens' Council." Being male also benefited Carter. He hunted and socialized with many of the people whom he offended with his columns. He had a reputation as a man's man, a hard drinker, and an outdoorsman, and thus it gave him some leeway that a woman like Smith did not have. The white

³⁴ Ibid., 28 February 1957.

establishment in Holmes County had nothing but scorn for Carter, so when he won an award praising Smith, that damned Smith in their eyes even more.³⁵

In early October 1957, Smith's willingness to dissent from the strategy of massive resistance received praise in another Mississippi tabloid. The Jackson *State-Times*, a moderate alternative to the Hederman owned papers, praised Smith as a great example to good journalism during National Newspaper Week. Smith reprinted the article that lauded her for having the courage to do what was right in the promotion of freedom of speech. The *State-Times* saluted Smith for being a credit to her sex and the newspaper business. It concluded that Smith was an "outstanding woman editor who thinks before she writes-and writes what she thinks when the public interest is at stake."³⁶

Smith in turn defended herself in her column in the same issue she reprinted the *States-Times* editorial. Smith said that in twenty-one years of publishing newspapers, she had never tried to court personal or group favor. Her only goal had been "to print the news as it happens in a straight and unbiased manner-and to meet controversial issues when they arise clearly and honestly." She said it would have been easy to try to be a

³⁵ Ann Waldron, *Hodding Carter: The Reconstruction of a Racist*, 172, 186, 254-255, 263, 282-283; Neil McMillen, *The Citizens' Council*, 255; Elizabeth Gillespie McRae in her essay, "White Womanhood, White Supremacy, and the Rise of Massive Resistance," looks at a contemporary of Smith's, Florence Sillers Ogden. Sillers Ogden was the sister of Major Fred Sillers, the editor of the *Jackson Daily News*. She wrote a weekly column called "Dis and Dat" where she tied white patriarchy and white supremacy together. She urged white women to stay in their traditional role as mothers and inculcate the principles undergirding Jim Crow. Hazel Brannon Smith defied these notions. The essay is in Clive Webb, ed., *Massive Resistance: Southern Opposition to the Second Reconstruction* (New York: Oxford, 2005), 181-202.

³⁶ *Lexington Advertiser*, 10 October 1957; The Jackson *State-Times* was created in 1954 to combat the monopoly of the Hederman brothers. It developed a reputation for moderation concerning segregation. It posed no serious competition to the *Jackson Daily News* or the *Jackson Clarion Ledger*. The Hedermans bought it in 1962. See Susan M. Weill, "Mississippi's Daily Press in Three Crises," in David R. Davies, ed., *The Press and Race*, 19.

popular editor, to just print what people wanted to hear, but she refused to do that. She concluded:

We are basically honest and cannot run a newspaper that way. So when the time comes and a decision must be made to stand for what we believe to be in the best interest of our community and its people, we just have to stand for what we believe to be right. We are not looking for a fight-but we have never run away from one-and we are too old to learn new tricks.³⁷

Smith pointed out that the “heroes of yesteryears” had fought a century before for the right to own slaves. For Smith, slavery was “universally a sin against God and man.” White southerners had zealously entered the Civil War, and it had brought devastation to the South. The war “had killed the flower of our manhood in the south and introduced an era of poverty and want from which we are only now recovering - and few were able to lift up their voices in protest.” Now, the defense of segregation and the attempt to find a rational solution served as the greatest domestic decision facing America since the Civil War. Smith denounced the ratcheting up of fear and tension and called for the white leadership in the state to “take the initiative of bringing together responsible leaders of both races for discussion of these vital problems and to evolve a workable solution acceptable to both races” or face the consequences of an even worse situation in Mississippi. This kind of plea fell on deaf ears since most of the white leadership, both at a local and state level, resorted to legal chicanery, intimidation, and violence to maintain the racial status quo.³⁸

Smith’s reputation took another shot in late 1957 through an article by the national black magazine, *Ebony*. The article was entitled “The Plight of Southern White

³⁷ *Lexington Advertiser*, 10 October 1957.

³⁸ *Ibid.*, 10 October 1957.

Women.” Though the article did not mention Smith directly, it did include a photograph of Smith with the caption,

University of Alabama graduate Hazel Brannon Smith edits two crusading Mississippi newspapers the *Durant News* and the *Lexington Advertiser* which have been called ‘the conscience of Holmes County.’ She had campaigned for equal justice for all, regardless of race.³⁹

Circulars began to anonymously make the rounds in Holmes County pointing to the *Ebony* photo as undeniable proof that Smith promoted integration. Horrified, Smith told her readers that she had not even known about the article until a friend gave her a copy of the magazine. She figured that *Ebony* got the photograph from Time magazine’s piece on her winning the Byrd appeal. She wrote to *Time* and asked for an explanation.⁴⁰

In the Halloween 1957 *Advertiser*, Smith reprinted the letter she had written to *Time*. She wrote that she had never advocated integration, whether in her paper or in conversations. Some were attempting to “imply otherwise,” and she wanted to set the record straight. Smith said her friends had convinced her to respond because of what she considered “a small group in Holmes County” who were trying to use the *Ebony* piece to paint her as something she was not. Smith warned her readers that she would publish the names of people who were attacking her if the abuse did not stop. She had taken attacks for her stance on law and order, but she remained faithful to her subscribers. Smith said she had always taken a progressive stand for the county in regards to law and order, economic improvement, better schools, and equal justice for all. She concluded, “There is not a worthwhile movement started in Holmes County in the past 21 years that hasn’t

³⁹ Arthur J. Kaul, “Hazel Brannon Smith and the *Lexington Advertiser*,” in David Davies, *The Press and Race* (Jackson, Ms.: University Press of Mississippi, 2001), 246

⁴⁰ *Ibid.*, 246; In the *Lexington Advertiser* 24 October 1957, Smith defended herself by saying that the article itself did not make a direct reference to her.

been supported or given consideration by this writer, as a matter of fact.” She urged her readers to rise above pettiness and work for community improvement. Smith reprinted the *Time* response in the next week’s column. The magazine said it had given *Ebony* a copy of its photograph out of professional courtesy and apologized that the magazine had used Smith’s photo without getting her permission. Despite Smith’s efforts to rectify the situation, she could not stop her growing reputation as an outsider and troublemaker in regards to racial issues. Smith had not altered her views on race. She remained committed to segregation. That being said, she could not abide either her community or her state’s intensifying racial invective and organized resistance. From the other side, her neighbors rejected Smith’s attempt to find the middle ground.⁴¹

Smith demonstrated this striving for the middle way in November 1957 when she reported on the countywide meeting of the Citizens’ Council chapters, held at Lexington. She gave a straightforward account of the meeting of men dedicated to silencing her voice. And ironically, by giving a clear account of what the organization stood for, Smith shed light on why many viewed her as a detriment to the community. She noted that Holmes County had seven local chapters. William Moses, a prominent car dealer in Lexington, served as the county president. Jamie Whitten, a U.S. Congressman from Mississippi, served as the keynote speaker. Before a large crowd, Whitten praised the organization’s members as “the composite and judgment of all the people in the county.” In his speech, Whitten described the Supreme Court’s rendering of *Brown* as being in line with the Nazi and Communist takeovers of Germany and Russia. According to Whitten,

⁴¹ *Lexington Advertiser*, 31 October, 7 November 1957; Wilma Dykeman and James Stokely, “The Plight of Southern White Women,” *Ebony*, 13, 1 (November 1957), 32-34, 36-38.

the first step toward totalitarianism came about when Hitler and Stalin got control of the courts. In the face of other states facing an immediate integration crisis, Whitten promised that the Mississippi congressional delegation would fight integration in the Magnolia state. Whitten promised that even if the Mississippi congressional delegation lost the battle, it would go down “with a feeling of being on the right side.”⁴²

Whitten’s remarks implied two conclusions about people like Smith. First, by opposing the tactics of the Citizens’ Council, she showed she lacked good judgment by opposing the expressed will of the community. She claimed repeatedly that she only wanted to serve the community, but to Whitten and the members of the Citizens’ Council, Smith only hurt the community by her refusal to fall in lock step with the organization’s agenda. Second, Whitten called for resistance to integration even at the point of abolishing the school system. In other words, white Mississippians should do whatever was necessary to oppose the dismantling of Jim Crow, even if it meant dismantling education itself. Smith vehemently opposed integration, but not at the cost of societal destruction and the loss of personal liberties. Thus, her protest smacked of betrayal, and that could not be tolerated.⁴³

Smith not only angered the white elites of Holmes County for what she wrote, but also what she did not. Smith gave her rationale in a March 1, 1956 column. She said that too many newspapers, a not so veiled slap at the Hederman papers, were creating a

⁴² Ibid., 7 November 1957; Jamie Whitten was elected to the U.S. House in 1941 and served until 1995. He was a staunch segregationist and voted with other Mississippi Representatives against the Civil Rights Acts of 1957, 1960, 1964, 1965, and 1968. For a brief look at Whitten’s career see, Joseph Crespino, *In Search of Another Country: Mississippi and the Conservative Counterrevolution* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton Univ. Press, 2007), 268; Chris Myers Asch, *The Senator and the Sharecropper: The Freedom Struggles of James O. Eastland and Fannie Lou Hamer* (New York: New Press, 2008), 203.

⁴³ Hodding Carter, Jr., *First Person Rural*, 223.

“worsening racial situation” by constantly harping on the issue. Smith thought to downplay events in the hope that rational white and black citizens could find answers. In her view, more talk only added fuel to the fire. Sanity and reason had to be restored.⁴⁴

Smith tried to live up to this idea. In the summer of 1956, 101 of the 128 southern legislators in the U.S. Congress signed the “Southern Manifesto.” This document condemned the *Brown* decision and called for the South to resist its implementation. With the advice of the Citizens’ Council, the Congressional delegation passed a resolution supporting the document as well. Smith chose not to comment. Even worse in the eyes of many of her readers, Smith did not comment on the integration crisis at Little Rock, Arkansas in 1957. This was the first time the federal government used its power to enforce *Brown*. Smith made no statement commending the stand of Governor Orbal Faubus who vowed to keep nine black students out who wanted to integrate Central High School, and she did not condemn President Dwight Eisenhower for sending in federal troops to guarantee their admittances over Faubus’s stonewalling and bellicose threats. In fact, Smith wrote a private letter to James C. Hagerty, Eisenhower’s press secretary, where she affirmed Eisenhower’s strong stand. She did not believe in integration, but she also did not believe in the breakdown of law and order and massive resistance. She still believed that Mississippians (white and black) could avoid *Brown*’s implementation if groups like the Citizens’ Council stopped fomenting hatred and discord.⁴⁵

⁴⁴ *Lexington Advertiser*, 1 March 1956.

⁴⁵ Mark Newman, “Hazel Brannon Smith and Holmes County, Mississippi, 1936-1964: The Making of a Pulitzer Prize Winner,” *The Journal of Mississippi History* 54, 1 (February 1992), 69; Hodding Carter III, *The South Strikes Back* (Garden City, NY: Doubleday, 1959), 153.

Whether by editorial commission or omission, Smith's defiance was grounded not only in her belief in the public's right to know, but also in the belief that the public would make good decisions once fully informed. She had found community support in her earlier crusade against bootlegging and organized crime, and she believed that if she printed a balanced news account on civil rights, the people of Holmes County would respond in a way that benefited the community. Thus, in 1958, she continued to attack the extremism of white supremacy despite her growing losses of reputation and revenue. Smith really believed that the truth would convince people to make the right decisions. For many of her readers, bootleggers were one thing, integration and the dismantling of Jim Crow was a completely different beast. Smith misread the sentiments of the majority of readers and paid dearly for it.⁴⁶

While Smith may have incorrectly gauged the attitudes of her readers, she clearly saw by 1958 where this tunnel vision view of massive resistance was taking the state. Dedicated to racial integrity, Mississippi leaders were allowing the state to languish in other more important areas. For almost four years, she had withstood a growing assault for her dissent, and she felt that the state was starting to head over a cliff. Smith thought laying out the condition Mississippi found itself in would go a long way in helping her readers make decisions to improve the state. Throughout the mid 1950s, she wrote about the growing out migration of whites and blacks from Mississippi and Holmes County specifically. She called for Mississippi to move away from the cotton monoculture and become more diversified in agriculture, business, and industrial development. She

⁴⁶ An example of Smith's faith in the public can be found in her *Lexington Advertiser*, 5 January 1956 column. She said her job was to present the truth as clearly as possible. And if she presented the truth, people would find their way.

sounded out this theme again in her January 16, 1958 column. She noted that her home state of Alabama had secured more industrial plants in the previous six months than Mississippi had built in the previous eight years. Mississippi lagged behind in industrial development, and half of all Mississippi schools only met eight months out of the year. She pointed out that Mississippi was ranked forty-eighth in teacher salaries, and 800 teachers left the state in 1957.⁴⁷

The next week she tied these problems to an even greater dilemma, that of refighting the Civil War and focusing on the South's past instead of working for a better present and future. The event that brought out her frustration concerned a discussion in the Mississippi legislature about whether or not to remove a portrait of Governor Adelbert Ames from the governor's mansion. Ames had served in the Union army during the Civil War and became involved in Mississippi politics during the Reconstruction era. Most white Mississippians considered him an opportunistic carpetbagger. Smith bristled with frustration over the fact that legislators focused on such trivia while Mississippi was mired in poverty, ignorance, and seething racial tensions. Smith chastised the white Mississippi leadership's benighted attitude over supposed slights about the South, instead of working to solve Mississippi's endemic problems. She wrote, "Instead of talking about our glorious past we ought to be planning and working toward a greater future." To accentuate the kinds of problems that Holmes County faced, she published on the front page of the next edition of the *Advertiser* that over 22,000 of the county's citizens (most of these African American) had to receive government food commodities in order to survive. Another 2,500 received aid checks

⁴⁷ Ibid., 16 January 1958.

from the federal government. For Smith, the Lost Cause was just that, lost, and thus leaders needed to address real problems facing the state. By 1958, the state of Mississippi's move to the extreme right forced Smith to veer in the direction that her neighbors considered left. In their minds, the once appreciated editor was now becoming the dreaded "liberal."⁴⁸

While considered an anathema by many in Holmes County, Smith continued to receive accolades from her peers in the press. She earned many awards in her career, and in 1958, the Mississippi Press Association awarded Smith a citation for her battle for freedom of the press, especially in regards to her legal battle with former sheriff Richard Byrd. This pattern emerged after 1954. Smith's state and national peers recognized her for editorial achievements while her contemporaries in Holmes County attacked and reviled her.⁴⁹

Though she vehemently defended segregation, by 1958 it was clear that Smith was evolving in her views toward racial integration. In March, Smith blasted the white establishment's fury over an interracial forum held at Millsaps College in Jackson. The forum allowed for a discussion about current issues between white Millsaps students and students from local black colleges. To many, this kind of meeting served as the first step down the slippery slope of racial integration. After all, it exposed as false the ideal that black and white students could not coexist in a college atmosphere without instantly producing mixed-race babies or other trouble. Yet, Millsaps president, Dr. Lewis Finger, came under attack by members of the Citizens' Council for promoting integration.

⁴⁸ Ibid., 16, 23 January 1958.

⁴⁹ Ibid., 6 March 1958.

According to Smith, Finger responded by saying the issues at stake were academic freedom and freedom of speech, and that the interracial dialogue had nothing to do with segregation or integration. Smith weighed in and urged that Mississippians be allowed to speak and think for themselves and not be alarmed “by every new scare headline” or pressure by groups who wanted to enforce thought control. Smith pleaded with her readers, “Mississippi cannot progress in any direction-either economically, culturally, educationally, politically or socially if we continue to let the bugaboo of race enter into and scare us to death on ever matter that arises.” She concluded that if Mississippi could channel all the “wasted energy and brainpower over race” and turn it into attempts to solving the state’s real problems, then all would benefit. She urged local and state leaders to consult like-minded black leaders “within the framework of segregation” and promote good will and friendship. For those who constantly slandered moderates as integrationists because they rejected “rank injustice and rank discrimination,” Smith predicted that these rabble-rousers would only produce litigation that would lead to integration being forced upon Mississippians. And the rabble-rousers would only have themselves to blame. This plea for racial cooperation, political moderation, and basic understanding demonstrated that Smith was moving even further away from the accepted level of political dialogue in Mississippi in the late 1950s.⁵⁰

Personally, Smith did not want to see integration of the public schools any more than her critics did. She stressed again and again that if the majority of whites and blacks, as she thought, wanted to maintain segregation, both sides would voluntarily segregate themselves, and consequently, the *Brown* decision would prove to be mute.

⁵⁰ *Lexington Advertiser*, 13 March 1958

This meant there was no reason for the fear mongering and the hysteria that kept arising over white/black relations. For moderates like Smith, the constant harangue of groups like the Citizens' Council instilled fear in responsible whites who were afraid to stand up and speak. If they offered mild dissent, they faced, "economic reprisals and boycotts if they are in business, loss of jobs, pulpits, advertising and political jobs if they don't conform, loss of friends and social standing." And to make matters even worse, the constant pressure from Citizens' Council members had eroded, in her mind, the "reservoir of friendship and good will that we have enjoyed for so long from the leadership of the Negro race in Mississippi."⁵¹

Having lived her entire life steeped in the racist hierarchy of Jim Crow, Smith believed in the "happy Negro" myth, namely, that African Americans were basically content and assented to the separation imposed by segregation. Up to the mid-1950s, she had never questioned the validity of this belief because she experienced life as a member of the dominant group in the hierarchy. For the first time in her life, she was starting to experience the wrong side of Jim Crow segregation. Compared to African Americans, Smith's experiences did not even come close to the oppression, the terror, and the marginalization they faced. Yet, she had started feeling great pressure and social discomfort. To Smith, the pressure to conform smacked of the kind of oppression one found in "godless Russia" where the individual counted for nothing, "a mere slave of the state who does what he is told without question." That it existed in Russia was one thing. With consternation and dread she asked, how could it be found "...in America, the land of the free and the home of the brave? In Mississippi, the home of the Bible belt?"

⁵¹ Ibid., 13 March 1958.

During her first twenty plus years in Mississippi, Smith had never shied away from controversy. It seems clear that she embraced it. That being said, she always felt the stands she took would gather most of the community's support in the long run. In her wildest nightmares, the once popular and dashing editor never imagined that the middle of the road stance she took would so isolate her amongst people she had once considered friends and neighbors.⁵²

Even with the pressure mounting, Smith refused to bend. She continued to attack the growing pressure and pleaded with her readers for rationality and tolerance. In April in 1958, she reported on another Mississippi editor who had told of a reader threatening him to a duel over something the editor had written. Taking a shot at her adversaries in Holmes County, Smith said her colleague was lucky that his enemy wanted to fight face to face. She quipped, "Most editors get hatchets buried in their backs by moral cowards."⁵³

In May 1958, she reported on the bombings of a black high school and a Jewish center in Jacksonville, Florida, as well as other bombings of Jewish synagogues in Miami, Florida and Nashville, Tennessee. Smith stressed that if "hate pressure groups" were allowed to flourish and go unpunished, then the South could expect "many more such outrages." Like she had done with the bootleg issue, she called for people to stand up for law and order. She warned her readers that turning a blind eye to injustice would come back to haunt them. She wrote,

⁵² Ibid., 13 March 1958. In a notepad she kept in 1946, Hazel Brannon maintained a list of Holmes County people whom she sent postcards to while she was in Europe. Many of these same "friends" would oppose her in the late 1950s. Notebook in Hazel Brannon Smith papers, Mitchell Library, Special Collections, Mississippi State University.

⁵³ *Lexington Advertiser*, 10 April 1958.

If we don't speak up for decency, law, and order for individual liberty and freedom under the law, then we are destined to wake up soon with all of our freedom gone. The hoodlums have taken over entirely. If they can bomb a synagogue today and get away with it, tomorrow it may well be your church, or mine.⁵⁴

She addressed the need for a free press and deplored the same kind of violence in October of 1958 when a Jewish synagogue in Nashville was bombed. In regards to the violence in Nashville, she echoed the same sentiments expressed back in May. The bombing was a crime against the South and a public relations black-eye because it painted all white southerners as violent rednecks. For Smith, the extremists had taken over and had intimidated the “people of good will” into silence. If this situation did not change, then “we lose our freedom.” She prophesied more bombings of homes, schools, and churches if white southerners did not rise up in “righteous indignation” and demand an end to such actions. Without specifying individuals, Smith laid the blame for such a deplorable atmosphere of fear and violence at the feet at groups like the Citizens’ Council and the newspapers like the ones owned by the Hedermans in Jackson. They were the ones who “continually agitated the racial conflict” and thus shared “in the responsibility for creating the climate in which such acts of violence are allowed to happen.”⁵⁵

Smith’s plea for the county’s leadership to follow a path of moderation, rationality, and law did not find an audience among her peers in Holmes County. The most effective way that her enemies could strike back at Smith was through convincing people to not advertise in her newspapers. That stratagem was starting to impact Smith by the fall of 1957. Normally the *Lexington Advertiser* ran eight pages. By September,

⁵⁴ Ibid., 15 May 1958.

⁵⁵ Ibid., 16 October 1958.

many of her editions numbered only six pages. Yet over the next year, Smith continued to attack the extremism of the white establishment at the local and state level. To counter, leading whites in Holmes County enacted a plan to strip Smith of her livelihood and silence her editorial voice. Their coup d'état came in the formation of a rival newspaper.⁵⁶

In December 1958, a group of wealthy local men, all avowed members of the Citizens' Council, launched a full-scale assault against Smith. They started a rival newspaper, the *Holmes County Herald*. What was the purpose of the paper? Obviously, one goal was to present the predominant white view on racial issues. Secondly and more importantly, the goal of the paper was to take Smith's advertising share and put her out of business. As Hugh Graham Davis points out, the majority of the white leadership in Mississippi viewed journalists like Smith as out of step with the prevailing racial orthodoxy. He wrote, "Mississippi, even urban Mississippi, would not tolerate political heterodoxy on the part of a major newspaper." Thus, if racial moderation would not be tolerated in the large metropolis of Jackson, it was no wonder that Smith found herself under attack in rural Holmes County. Editors like Smith and her delta colleague Hodding Carter, Jr., found intense resistance because they served as, "islands of unorthodoxy in a monolithic sea."⁵⁷

The formation the *Holmes County Herald* proved to be the point of no return for Smith's career and outlook. The community had once accepted and considered her a valuable citizen, but the formation of a rival paper was the white establishment's way of

⁵⁶ Mark Newman, "Hazel Brannon Smith and Holmes County," 70.

⁵⁷ Hugh Davis Graham. *Crisis in Print: Desegregation and the Press in Tennessee* (Nashville: Vanderbilt University Press, 1967), 315.

saying that Smith was *persona non grata* in the county. The *Herald* served as a public slap to Smith and all that she stood for as well as a vehicle for crippling her economically. One *Herald* stockholder summarized how he viewed Smith. While she thought of herself as helping the community, the *Herald* backer countered, “Mrs. Smith does not reflect the thinking of most of the white people of the county at a time when solidarity of opinion is needed to preserve the Southern way of life.”⁵⁸

In one sense, the formation of the *Herald* liberated Smith because she no longer had to tippy-toe around the issues in Holmes County. She no longer feared naming names since her enemies were open about seeking her destruction. Thus, when news of the rival paper’s formation became known, she launched a full-scale counterattack. Yet, this liberation also came with a sense of bitterness and betrayal. In September of 1957, Smith hired Chester Marshall to run the daily operation of the *Lexington Advertiser* and the *Durant News*. Almost 16 months later, the group of men who formed the *Herald* wooed Marshall away with the offer of owning one-third of the paper and serving as its managing editor. Not only had the county’s leadership repudiated Smith and her contributions to the county, but even worse, a trusted employee stabbed her in the back.

As had been her pattern for twenty-two years, Smith took the offensive and fired back at those she thought were hurting the community through their attempts at intimidation. This time she had no problem naming names. In her December 4, 1958 article on the paper’s founding, she pointed out that Marshall had acquired one-third ownership of the paper and had total command. She noted that between thirty-five and

⁵⁸ Reed Sarratt *The Ordeal of Desegregation: The First Decade* (New York: Harper and Row, 1966), 258.

sixty men had shown up at the Lexington city hall for a meeting over the formation of the paper. William Moses chaired the meeting. Former state legislator Edwin White and Pat Barrett, prosecuting attorney for Holmes County, joined several others in developing a charter for the paper. David Miles and Wilburn Hooker took on the task of selling stock for the corporation. Miles, a prominent farmer from the hamlet of Pickens and member of the Holmes County Hospital Board, had led the effort to fire Walter Dyer Smith back in 1956. Hooker owned an insurance agency in Lexington, but more importantly, served on the state executive committee of the Citizens' Council and later would serve on the executive committee of the State Sovereignty Commission. Smith reported that the paper had been capitalized at a cost of \$30,000 with individual shares costing \$25.⁵⁹

In her *Through Hazel Eyes* column, Smith predicted that with the arrival of the new paper, "somebody is going broke." She reminded her readers that two papers could not survive in Lexington. Besides her two papers, only one other existed in the county. The *Herald* could only survive if all the advertising went to it, and even that alone would not keep the paper afloat for long. She also believed that people were being pressured to buy stock in the paper and buy the paper itself. Many of her friends admitted to her that they had felt pressured to buy stock. Smith warned her readers that the *Herald* served as a threat to the community. She pleaded with her readers to stay with her. She wrote, "If such pressure continues to be used they will soon destroy our community and our people- and discredit us in the eyes of Mississippi and the nation. It is time to stop them-NOW is the time. Tomorrow may be too late." She vowed to her readers that she was going to

⁵⁹ *Lexington Advertiser*, 4 December 1958.

make the rounds in the community and work hard to make sure all who were interested got the best personal service. Facing economic annihilation, she had little choice.⁶⁰

Not content with two articles on the formation of the *Herald*, Smith printed a two-column front-page editorial entitled “A Free or Controlled Press.” In this editorial, Smith said she was under attack by a group that did not like her editorial policy. She noted that the *Herald*, in its first issue, promised to not take sides in controversial issues. For Smith, that was tantamount to “No Hazel Eyes, no editorials.” She reminded her readers that bowing to pressure groups meant becoming slaves much like people who lived in Communist Russia. She noted that the county had supported her throughout the 1940s and early 1950s in her law and order campaign because they did not want to be ruled by bootleggers, gamblers, or “an organized political machine.” Facing economic eclipse, she vowed to fight back and promised she would be around to publish the obituaries of those that opposed her.⁶¹

Stunned by the creation of the *Herald* and stung by Marshall’s defection and betrayal, Smith could not resist in aiming a verbal shot at her former employee as well as defending herself. In the December 11, 1958 Advertiser, Smith put Marshall’s actions in a biblical context. She wrote, “The price of betrayal comes high these days. A long time ago it was 30 pieces of silver.” Surely she was not putting herself on the same level as Jesus Christ and his being betrayed by Judas for thirty pieces of silver, but she did believe was being martyred for the cause of free speech. In her mind, the rival paper had been formed with the express purpose of putting her out of business. She said that some of her

⁶⁰ Ibid., 4 December 1954.

⁶¹ Ibid., 4 December 1958. Smith did publish Richard Byrd’s obituary in 1960.

old bootlegging enemies took part in the new paper's creation. In her mind, many in the county wanted revenge for having "their ears pinned back" by the Supreme Court overturning the Byrd libel verdict. She repeated her defense that she had never advocated integration and thus tried to portray her struggle as a battle for free speech in defense of community health and values.⁶²

With her enemies open about her destruction, Smith decided to take the kid gloves off and make an open declaration of war. She saw the men behind the *Herald* as a threat to her economic well being as well as a threat to the community. Using the strongest of terms, she charged the *Herald* group with acting like Hitler's Gestapo, trying to control every aspect of Holmes society. She went further and charged that "this vicious little combine" was like an octopus trying to thrust its tentacles "into almost every aspect of life in Holmes County." She declared, "This attempted dictatorship based upon a lust for power and domination over the people should be stopped now dead in its tracks-before it gets us in a stranglehold and never lets go." In her mind, these charges were not exaggerated, but a serious threat to people's basic civil liberties. She had come to see the Citizens' Council and its tactics as a greater threat to Mississippi than any mild attempt at integration. Her newspaper served as a deterrent to this threat. Thus, she vowed to "preserve the peace and harmony of Holmes County." She refused to remain silent as people tried to destroy her newspaper "which I consider a public trust intended to be used only for the public good."⁶³

⁶² Ibid., 11 December 1958.

⁶³ Ibid., 18 December 1958.

She urged her readers to resist this effort and continue to support her paper in order to have access to all the news. Then she laid down the gauntlet,

Every act you commit in the future against me, or what I consider to be against the general interest of the People of Holmes County, I will expose to the white light of publicity in these two Holmes County newspapers- and the battle may be greater and more far-reaching than you now anticipate.⁶⁴

From the end of 1958 to the late 1960s, Smith battled the *Holmes County Herald* in a two-pronged uphill battle. First, she fought to keep her paper afloat as the *Herald* took most of her advertising. Secondly, she fought the *Herald* in how the news was presented to the readers of Holmes County. As Mississippi roiled in the 1960s with the civil rights movement and subsequent white backlash, the *Herald* reported the news through a pro-segregationist perspective. Smith countered and tried to present events in a more objective tone. This commitment and the backlash she faced pushed her toward becoming an ally of the civil rights movement.

⁶⁴ Ibid., 18 December 1958.

CHAPTER VI

“THIS FEMALE SCALAWAG DOMICILED IN OUR MIDST”: TRANSFORMING INTO A CIVIL RIGHTS ACTIVIST

“If you read her newspaper, you would know why we have the attitude we do toward her. We are no longer proud of her paper.”
Senator T.M. Williams, Holmes County, *Jackson Clarion Ledger*, 5
January 1961

In 1943, the leaders of Lexington welcomed the unmarried Hazel Brannon with a paid banner at the top of her first edition that read, “Lexington Welcomes Miss Hazel Brannon.”¹ By 1960, the leadership of the town and much of the county’s white populous considered the editor a pariah and wanted her cast out in as public a manner as possible. Some children whose fathers were a part of the white establishment demonstrated this animus on October 31, 1960. On a night when youngsters all over Lexington went from house to house looking for treats, a group of Lexington teenagers decided to inflict a sinister trick on Hazel Brannon Smith. The editor and her husband Walter were drinking coffee in their kitchen when they thought they heard firecrackers going off. As the couple went outside to investigate, it appeared that one of their magnolia trees was on fire. The reality proved much worse. The teenagers had erected an eight-foot high wooden cross and set it on fire. For a century, a burning cross had

¹ *Lexington Advertiser*, 8 April 1943

been the symbol of the Ku Klux Klan. It spoke of one's being cast off by white society. Ira Harkey, Smith's fellow Mississippi editor who resided on the Gulf Coast, also experienced the same indignity in the early 1960s. In his memoir, *The Smell of Burning Crosses: The Autobiography of a Mississippi Newspaperman*, he voiced the horror and sense of doom that the victim of this hate crime felt. He wrote,

No one not rooted in the South can understand the full terror of a cross burning, this classic threat from the Klan. It is like the voice of doom, the sentence of death, the placing of the victim beyond the pale. Marking him for punishment by some of the most ruthless thugs in the history of mankind. I did not let my wife and children see how profoundly I was shaken. I grinned, an idiot expression I was to try to wear through the next nine years of violence and threats of violence and in my column the next week I hailed the year's new season with, "Ah, autumn! Falling leaves...the hint of a north breeze stirring in the night...the smell of burning crosses in the air."²

Whatever horror Hazel Brannon Smith felt, she also seethed with anger. She charged down the drive, forcing the young men who had committed the deed to flee. In their flight, they had abandoned their vehicle. Smith took the license plate off of the car, took a picture of the burning cross, and began an investigation of the incident.³

This event epitomized the position Smith found herself in after fighting the white establishment of Holmes County for six years. Before the May 1954 *Brown* decision, Smith's newspapers had earned her a substantial income and a well-respected place in the community. In the aftermath of *Brown*, whites in counties like Holmes formed local Citizens' Council chapters in order to resist the dismantling of Jim Crow. Smith angered many local leaders by not joining the countywide effort of massive resistance. On top of

² Ira Harkey, Jr. *The Smell of Burning Crosses: An Autobiography of a Mississippi Newspaperman* (Jacksonville, Illinois: Harris-Wolfe and Col, 1967), 104.

³ *Lexington Advertiser*, 10 November 1960; *Ibid.*, 65; T. George Harris, "The 11-Year Siege of Mississippi's Lady Editor," *Look* (16 November 1965), 128.

that, Smith violated racial etiquette by calling for Sheriff Richard Byrd's resignation after shooting Henry Randle, an unarmed black man, in July of 1954. Between 1954 and 1958, Smith further alienated many white Holmes Countians by continuing to challenge their tactics concerning the maintenance of segregation. She rejected the attempt to enforce uniformity of thought. Though a believer in segregation, she rejected the idea that she had to condone tactics like overt violence or covert intimidation in the name of racial purity. This led many to boycott her newspapers in Durant and Lexington and culminated in the formation of a rival newspaper, the *Holmes County Herald*, in December 1958. Once a valued member of the community, the white leaders of Holmes County had concluded that Smith was a troublemaker and a pariah. As one stockholder of the *Herald* admitted, "Mrs. Smith does not reflect the thinking of most of the white people of the county at a time when solidarity of opinion is needed to preserve the southern way of life."⁴

Between 1959 and 1962, the actions of many whites in Holmes County and all of Mississippi further pushed Smith away from what was considered mainstream thought. As Mississippi roiled in racial hatred and violence, Smith pleaded with her readers to reconsider and find a path of mutual respect, brotherhood, and adherence to law and order. She castigated racial hatred and intransigence. She came to see her own struggle for civil liberties in the same hemisphere as the African American struggle for civil rights. As Mississippi continued to earn a well-deserved reputation for bigotry, backwardness, and mind numbing violence, Smith demonstrated a resolve to uphold the

⁴ Reed Sarratt *The Ordeal of Desegregation: The First Decade* (New York: Harper and Row, 1966), 258.

American values of freedom of speech, equal justice under the law, and tolerance. For many African Americans, Smith's commitment to tolerance and racial harmony spoke of the possibility of a better day coming in Mississippi. Gilbert Mason, a black physician and civil rights activist in Mississippi during the 1960s, voiced this sentiment. He wrote,

Hazel Brannon Smith may have knelt in prayer, but racists never brought her to her knees broken. In public she stated that she 'would not take crap off anyone,' and I believed her. I got to know her well and thought the world of her. I knew that Mississippi was redeemable, so long as salt-of-the-earth people like Hazel Brannon Smith were willing to struggle for its soul. She gave me hope for the future of progressive biracial politics in Mississippi.⁵

A new day for Mississippi seemed far far away in 1959 for both African Americans and Smith. Black Mississippians faced concentrated resistance by the white majority who were determined to maintain Jim Crow society. Smith faced economic annihilation for not supporting this resistance.

The Mack Charles Parker lynching in 1959 presented a chilling example of the horrors black Mississippians faced, while at the same time, providing a case study in how Smith covered the event as opposed to her rival, the Citizens' Council backed *Holmes County Herald*. Parker, an African American, was arrested in April 1959 for the rape of a white woman named June Walters near Poplarville, Mississippi. The town is located in south Mississippi, about an hour north of the Gulf Coast. The alleged rape happened at

⁵ Gilbert R. Mason and James Patterson Smith, *Beaches, Blood, and Ballots: A Black Doctor's Civil Rights Struggle* (Jackson, Ms.: University press of Ms. 2000), 189; Historians Mark Newman and Arthur J. Kaul have debated how far Smith actually moved. Newman argues that Smith experienced a full-blown evolution from segregationist to being an advocate for civil rights and integration. Kaul counters and argues that Smith's "advocacy of truth, justice, and equality under the law never constituted an outright endorsement of integration." Newman hits closer to the truth. See Mark Newman, "Hazel Brannon Smith and Holmes County, Mississippi, 1936-1964: The Making of a Pulitzer Prize Winner," *The Journal of Mississippi History*, 54, 1, (February 1992), 59; Arthur J. Kaul, "Hazel Brannon Smith and the Lexington Advertiser," in David R. Davies, ed., *The Press and Race: Mississippi Journalists Confront the Movement* (Jackson, Ms.: University Press of Mississippi, 2001), 261.

night on an isolated road between Poplarville and the community of Lumberton. Walters, her husband Jimmy, and their four year old daughter, were traveling down the road at night when their car broke down. Walters waited in the disabled vehicle with her child while her husband went for assistance. Later, Parker and some companions drove by and saw the car and Walters. Supposedly, Parker dropped off his friends and then went back and raped June Walters. While under arrest, one of Parker's three companions stated that Parker boasted that he was going to return to the woman and the abandoned car. Parker, on the other hand, steadfastly maintained his innocence. He took two lie detector tests, but they both proved inconclusive. Parker was beaten upon his arrest, and June Walters failed to identify him in a lineup. Later, in another lineup, Parker was told to repeat the words that were spoken to Walters before the rape. This time, Walters identified Parker as her rapist. Parker was never able to defend himself at a trial. A white lynch mob believed it had enough evidence. With the help of the jailer, the men got into the Poplarville jail and abducted Parker. They beat the young man and then carried him to the Louisiana state line. There, they shot Parker twice and dumped his body into the Pearl River. Mississippi Governor James P. Coleman allowed the Federal Bureau of Investigation (FBI) to come in and perform an inquiry. Though the FBI was able to gather a considerable amount of evidence and compile the names of several of the assailants, local officials in Poplarville refused to allow a grand jury to see this information.⁶

⁶ John Dittmer, *Local People* (Urbana, Ill.: Univ. of Illinois Press, 1995), 83-85; Dasher-Alston, Robin, "Parker, Charles Mack (1936-1959) Lynching of," in Walter C. Rucker and James N. Upton, *Encyclopedia of American Race Riots*, Vol. 2 (Westport, Conn.: Greenwood Press, 2007), 495-498; For a

The lynching of Mack Charles Parker clearly delineated the differences in philosophy between Smith's papers and the *Herald*. Both agreed that the event was shocking, that mob violence should not be tolerated, and that the perpetrators needed to be punished. Besides those commonalities, the papers went on vastly divergent paths. The *Herald* placed the Parker murder at the feet of the emerging civil rights movement. The paper blamed the *Brown* decision and the national media for pushing whites in Mississippi to extreme measures. A writer going by the pseudonym "Graz Rutz" regularly contributed a column to the *Herald*. In the wake of the Parker lynching, Graz Rutz denounced the mob violence and said that Mississippians were "law abiding people" but had received "disgraceful and unfair treatment" from "the hands of the federal courts." According to this writer, "vicious minority groups" controlled the government, and the *Brown* decision had led to a "breakdown of constitutional law." In the aftermath of the decision, "a small segment of the colored population" took this to mean that they had cart blanche to do as they pleased and be protected by the courts. In Graz Rutz's mind, the courts were letting "vicious minorities" off on technicalities and thus it was no wonder that "the people" (meaning whites) were going to rise up and take matters into their own hands. Graz Rutz concluded, "As much as we deplore mob violence we are not surprised at the latest mob action. There may be more unless our courts render justice instead of catering to minorities." For this anonymous contributor, the "decent people's rights" had been "continually violated," and they refused to be pushed any further. Based on these events, the Mack Parker murder was regrettable, but was clearly understandable.

full account, see Charles Smead, *Blood Justice: The Lynching of Mack Charles Parker* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1986).

Chester Marshall, the editor of the *Herald*, expressed regret over the vigilante murder in his own column “Hi Lites Over Holmes,” and he hoped the authorities would arrest and punish the perpetrators. Like Graz Rutz, he saw an even greater evil behind the murder. Marshall argued that the murder would be used by Communists and “racial agitators” to give Mississippi a black eye. He condemned the attempt by “do good journalists” and television commentators to use the murder to create a larger fissure between whites and blacks. In Marshall’s mind, the publicity thrown on the Parker murder was an attempt to “make a martyr out of a rapist.”⁷

Smith reacted very differently to the Parker lynching. She abhorred the actions of the mob and blamed them for placing a stain on the reputation of the state that would be difficult to be removed. For Smith, the mob had “committed a crime against every law-abiding man and woman in Mississippi.” In her opinion, a rapist deserved the death penalty, but she noted that Parker claimed to be innocent. Thus, due process had not been allowed to work. She reminded her readers that the vigilantes had planned the assault and possessed the cooperation of the jailer who left the facility unattended at the time of the abduction. In Smith’s view, Mississippi would suffer irreparable damage unless the perpetrators of the lynching met swift judgment. In the nation’s eyes, Mississippi already had blood on its hands from the acquittal of the murderers of the black youth Emmett Till in Money, Mississippi in 1955. Smith feared that history was going to repeat itself. She said the murderers of Charles Mack Parker had to be tried,

Otherwise the Poplarville mob will join the ghost of Emmett Till to haunt the conscience of the state of Mississippi and the South- an area that will

⁷ *Holmes County Herald*, 30 April 1959.

continue to be vilified in the nation's press as long as we permit crimes like this to happen or let them go unpunished when they do.⁸

While the *Herald* played to the anger and prejudice of its readers, Smith begged her readers to rise above its basest feelings and act in a way that would bring about a more just environment in the state. In November of 1959, the grand jury at Poplarville adjourned but passed down no indictments in the Parker murder. Smith had fought for law and order concerning bootlegging in the 1940s, and continued this fight for racial justice in the 1950s. She noted that when local officials and juries failed “to investigate or act when known crimes have been committed then it falls to the lot of the U.S. government to do it in Federal Court.”⁹

The *Herald*, on the other hand, wondered why there was so much interest in the killing Parker when other parts of the country had violent crime as well. In a May editorial, Graz Rutz quipped that there were all kinds of injustice in the U.S., but “let something happen to a maniacal colored rapist and it becomes a terrible crime.” If one only read the *Herald*, then the conclusion could have been drawn that white Mississippians were getting a raw deal. Smith's take on the news was that Mississippi was charging head long over the cliff of racial extremism. While a staunch believer in states' rights, the refusal of Mississippians to deal with racial violence pushed her further away from mainstream thought and forced her to admit that Mississippi might be forced to change from outside.¹⁰

⁸ *Lexington Advertiser*, 30 April 1959.

⁹ *Ibid.*, 30 April, 6 November 1959.

¹⁰ *Holmes County Herald*, 7 May 1959.

While both papers' agreed they did not want integration, only Smith's made sure its readers understood the realities of the times. What was that reality? Namely, massive resistance would only bring integration, the very thing despised by most white southerners. In May 1959, Smith praised Governor James P. Coleman's "practical" and slow approach to integration. In contrast to Arkansas Governor Orval Faubus, who challenged President Dwight Eisenhower over the integration of Central High School in Little Rock in 1957, Coleman did not believe in directly challenging federal authorities. Coleman had taken a lot of heat from members of the White Citizens' Council who thought his response was weak. Smith opined that Coleman was intelligent enough to deal "with the facts as they are." She reminded her readers that the courts were going to decide the integration issue and past precedents told a clear story, namely, "The integrationist suit has won." Like Coleman, Smith argued that the only real solution for Mississippians dedicated to segregation was to smooth relations between like minded-whites and blacks. Mississippi would only have to integrate if desegregation suits were brought in court. If white Mississippians toned down the belligerent racial rhetoric stopped the violence and intimidation, Smith believed that Mississippi could maintain the segregation of public schools "until doomsday." In the face of Jim Crow segregation crumbling and the depths that many whites were sinking to maintain the status quo, Smith grasped at straws and hoped against hope that a rational solution could be found.¹¹

In the *Herald*, Graz Rutz scoffed at Coleman's bringing in the FBI concerning the Parker case and described future political aspirations in the state on the same level as the

¹¹ Ibid., 21 May 1959; For Governor Coleman's handling of the Mack Parker case and his viewpoint toward the Citizens' Council see Joseph Crespino, *In Search of Another Country: Mississippi and the Conservative Counterrevolution* (Princeton, New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 2007), 22.

extinct dodo bird. For the *Herald* columnist, the “nine old fossils” of the Supreme Court who handed down the *Brown* decision bore the blame for violent acts like the Parker lynching. The court had bent over backwards for “colored criminals and communists” and thus no one should have been shocked that angry whites were going to lash out.¹²

In the last edition of May 1959, Smith countered that the extremes many had taken to fight integration had brought disrepute to the state as well as allowing “gangster tactics of blackmail and retaliation” to ferment in places like Holmes County. She experienced these kinds of tactics firsthand. She warned her readers that such tactics could paralyze and ruin a community. Smith re-stated her philosophy that her papers were dedicated to building up local businesses and helping the community in any way should could. In the face of such overwhelming local opposition, Smith tried to bypass the county’s leaders and appeal to the county’s readers at large.¹³

The difference in coverage and editorials concerning the Mack Charles Parker lynching served as a harbinger of things to come. The *Herald* took the belligerent route, and many times misreported or underreported events while Smith tried to give a more objective take on the issues and present more factual accounts of what was happening in the county and state.¹⁴

¹² *Holmes County Herald*, 28 May 1959. In the 18 June 1959 edition of the *Herald*, the paper reported on gubernatorial candidate Ross Barnett’s speech to a Holmes County WCC rally. In the talk, Barnett vowed to work with other governors “to join hands in a united front against integration agitators.” Barnett said this was necessary or whites “would be picked apart and dancing to the tune to the NAACP and other left-wing organizations.” Barnett also praised Arkansas governor Orval Faubus for his stance in 1957 concerning Little Rock High School. By 1959, Smith made it clear that she thought that this kind of leadership could only spell disaster for Mississippi.

¹³ *Lexington Advertiser*, 28 May 1959.

¹⁴ Susan Weill, “Hazel and the ‘Hacksaw’: Freedom Summer Coverage by the Women of the Mississippi Press,” *Journalism Studies*, 2, No. 4 (2000), 551 notes that most Mississippi newspapers that directly resisted the civil rights movement “avoided coverage through general reporting. In other words,

With gubernatorial candidates in full swing for the election in November of 1959, Smith could not resist editorializing about the need for the candidates to avoid exploiting racial animosity to gain votes. In an editorial entitled “Race Hatred Is Not the Answer,” Smith pleaded with her readers to think deeply about the candidates and vote for those who would “promote peace and harmony in the state among all our people, based on mutual tolerance and equal justice, understanding and good will.” Between 1954 and 1959, Smith had endured the social and economic displeasure of her neighbors because she refused to wholeheartedly accept violence and intimidation against blacks in the defense of Jim Crow. These experiences pushed Smith further and further away from mainstream thought concerning the realities of Jim Crow. In the same editorial, she bemoaned what she saw as the growing climate of prejudice, intolerance, and lawlessness, and concluded that both blacks and whites were going to take matters into their own hands if conditions did not improve. This would lead to race riots and chaos. Smith reminded her readers that the South had made the decision to leave the Union in 1860 and was still suffering from that decision. One hundred years later, the South stood on the same brink again. She concluded, “We do not want to see the South victimized again by extremists who want to push us into corners from which there can be no retreat. We do not want the South to forever suffer for another ‘Lost Cause.’”¹⁵

Editor Chester Marshall and the supporters behind the *Herald* considered Smith’s views as an anathema to the health of the community. The *Herald* ran an editorial on June 4, 1959 where it boasted that it was “established by the people and dedicated to the

rather than supplying readers with news reports of civil rights activities, the editors supplied readers with interpretations of facts and opinions aimed at maintaining the traditional Southern culture.”

¹⁵ *Lexington Advertiser*, 4 June 1959.

development, peace, and prosperity of all the people of Holmes County.” And how would the *Herald* work for this lofty goal? The editorial said the paper would fight against “left wing and communist front organizations” which were seeking to destroy the country, and that the paper would speak out against the imposition of “so-called Civil Rights legislation which breaks down and destroys good will between the races.”¹⁶

A week after Smith’s June 4 editorial on “Race Hatred,” Marshall ran an editorial that blasted Smith as the agitator. According to the *Herald*, too many papers were “agitating about ‘Race Hatred.’” Without mentioning Smith directly, the editorial excoriated her for trying to stir up trouble in a community where there only existed a “friendly cooperative spirit between the good white and colored people of Holmes County.” Marshall wondered if Smith was ignorant of this reality or simply “had a complete lack of sympathy” for this relationship. Marshall hinted that Smith might have had a more base motive, namely that of stirring up trouble in order to gain more readers and thus make more money. Whatever her motives, the *Herald* denounced Smith’s editorials “as a disservice to the community” and deserved only scorn and condemnation “by all good Holmes Countians.”¹⁷

From this brief sampling, it’s clear that Smith and the *Herald* posed two competing worldviews for the citizens of Holmes County. Since the *Brown* decision and pressure brought to bear on her, Smith had come to see some of the real underlying problems contained in the Jim Crow system of segregation. She had begun to gain a better understanding of the plight of African Americans in Mississippi; the inequity they

¹⁶ *Holmes County Herald*, 4 June 1959.

¹⁷ *Ibid.*, 11 June 1959.

faced, and the violence and intimidation they had to endure. The Citizens' Council had done their best to damage her reputation and erode her finances because she refused to keep quiet about white extremism. Smith, while still not a believer in integration, came to see that the at all costs effort to maintain Jim Crow actually threatened the liberty of all of Mississippi's citizens, not just African Americans. Thus, she pleaded with her readers to pull back from the brink of self-destruction in the name of racial purity.

The *Holmes County Herald*, on the other hand, took a totally different tack. The problem was not with Jim Crow but with federal authority and the ubiquitous "outside agitators" that sought to disrupt the racial hierarchy. Despite all the talk of a harmonious relationship between the races, the *Herald's* supporters understood it was a matter of power and dominance. While slavery no longer existed, whites in Holmes County and the entire state determined to maintain white supremacy and fight the apocalyptic terror of racial amalgamation. In the mind of many leading whites in Holmes County, Smith's equivocation over segregation reeked of a betrayal and pointed to a slow and agonizing death for their cherished beliefs.

Smith and Chester Marshall, and their respective papers, sniped at each other through the better part of 1959. In April, Smith boasted that she had more readership than all the other weekly papers in the county. In June, the *Herald* retorted that it has "more advertising than all three of the other newspapers serving Holmes County combined."¹⁸

County leaders, most of whom were financial backers of the *Herald*, worked to make sure that the *Herald* was the main source for news in the county. In February 1960,

¹⁸ *Lexington Advertiser*, 2 April 1959; *Holmes County Herald*, 18 June 1959.

the *Herald* got the two-year contract to publish the county's legal advertising and public announcements. Smith offered a bid of \$30 for the contract. The *Herald* offered one cent. Obviously, the goal of the county's leadership was to deliver another blow to Smith's reputation and weaken her place in the community. They also needed Smith to fail so that their own paper could succeed. Hodding Carter Jr., editor of the Greenville *Delta Democrat-Times* and Smith's colleague and close friend, noted that the *Herald* "couldn't have lasted three months without pressure in its behalf from county politicians and White Citizens' Council leaders."¹⁹

While Smith had become a pariah to many at home, she received praise from her peers outside the state. In the summer of 1960, the Journalism Department at Southern Illinois University awarded Smith its Elijah P. Lovejoy Courage in Journalism award. Lovejoy was an abolitionist editor killed by an angry mob in Alton, Illinois in 1837. The citation lauded Smith for her courage to run her newspaper while under great attack. Smith printed a picture of herself being given the award. The citation commended her "For demanding for all equal justice under the law, and for helping to defend those unable to defend themselves."²⁰

The *Associated Press* story on Smith's award mistakenly said she won the citation for writing editorials "supporting integration." This gave Chester Marshall and the *Herald* the needed ammunition to further smear Smith. The *Herald* ran a front-page article on Smith winning the honor and quoted the *Associated Press* piece. Marshall put

¹⁹ Arthur J. Kaul, "Hazel Brannon Smith and the Lexington Advertiser," in David R. Davies, ed., *The Press and Race: Mississippi Journalists Confront the Movement* (Jackson, Mississippi: University Press of Mississippi, 2001), 248; Hodding Carter, Jr., *First Person Rural* (Garden City, New York: Doubleday, 1963), 223-224.

²⁰ *Lexington Advertiser*, 26 July 1960.

the phrase “supporting integration” in boldface. Marshall wanted there to be no mistake why Smith was recognized. For the *Herald* and its readers, this made Smith worthy of contempt.²¹

The *Herald's* reporting outraged Smith. She reprinted a letter that she had sent to Chester Marshall. Smith already felt hostility toward Marshall because he had been in her employ, and then went to work for the *Herald*. In Smith's mind, Marshall was not only guilty of betrayal but also telling falsehoods. In the letter she reminded Marshall that the actual citation never used the phrase “supporting integration.” She also noted that Marshall knew her positions well since he had worked for her. She wrote,

Since you know of your own knowledge, Chester, having been in my employ for some 15 months, that I have never advocated integration of the races either in my newspaper or in any other way.” She said since he knew this, he had to know he was “printing a lie” and that his story “was false, malicious, and libelous.”²²

For Smith, the distinction was paramount. She had never advocated integration in her newspapers, but she had denounced discrimination, violence, and intimidation aimed at African Americans. For the supporters of the *Herald*, the distinction did not matter. By not promoting, or at least not challenging tactics used to insure white supremacy, Smith had made herself an enemy in the eyes of the respectable people of Holmes County.

From Smith's perspective, she saw the leadership of the county, and especially Lexington, as a small group of power hungry men bent on the domination of the county. She saw it as her duty to warn the county and the state at large. In May 1960, she blasted the Citizens' Council of Lexington for its self-appointed dictatorial powers. She said the

²¹ *Holmes County Herald*, 21 July 1960.

²² *Lexington Advertiser*, 21 July 1960.

men were acting in a way that was worthy of the Communist dictator of Russia, Nikita Khrushchev. For Smith, these men, in the name of protecting segregation, were threatening the basic freedoms that characterized the United States. Thus she wrote, “We do not need a self-appointed Kremlin in Lexington, or in Holmes County, to do either our thinking or talking.” Smith argued that “even the most radical, or most conservative person” had the right to live life on his or her own terms. She avowed, “That is the American way of life to which we subscribe.” By that same token, “we should be allowed the same right.”²³

Smith never set out to be a rabble-rouser or an advocate for any one group. As a journalist, she simply reserved the right to comment on issues as they came up, even if that meant criticizing the majority’s racist assumptions. An example occurred in August, 1960. Smith excoriated the Grenada County Circuit Court for a miscarriage of justice. The town of Grenada is fifty miles north of Lexington. A jury found a white man guilty of raping a sixteen-year-old black girl, but the court did not inflict the mandatory sentence of death. Smith pointed out the contradiction. If the offender had been black and the victim white, then the court would not have hesitated inflicting the maximum penalty. The failure to give justice because of skin color outraged Smith enough to issue an editorial entitled “Our Courts Should Dispense Equal Justice For All.” Smith not only criticized Mississippi courts that failed to administer justice fairly, but also editors who failed to speak out “when justice goes begging in our own communities.” Obviously pointing to her own self, Smith rejected the atmosphere that prevailed where editors who lifted “a voice to protect [sic] injustice, or rank discrimination is immediately tagged

²³ Ibid., 26 May 1960.

‘integrationist’ by the home grown variety of racial fanatics and extremists who seem to exist in almost every community.”²⁴

Smith got a measure of poetic justice in October 1960 when the stockholders of the *Herald* fired Chester Marshall. Smith took the opportunity to fire back at her enemies. She printed a story on Marshall’s firing and wrote, “Judgment Day has come for a former Holmes County editor – and sooner or later it going to catch up with those who were responsible for him.” She then repeated her challenge that she had issued when the *Herald* was founded in 1958. She wrote, “The *Advertiser* will continue to expose and report fully their activities – and we’ll still be around to carry their obituaries.” The stockholders of the *Herald* replaced Chester Marshall with Jack Shearer, a twenty-two year old who had recently graduated from Millsaps College in Jackson.²⁵

The satisfaction over Marshall’s firing did not last long because on Halloween night 1960, Smith and her husband had to endure the burning cross on her property. Enraged, she literally yanked the car tag off the vehicle left in haste by the perpetrators. She traced the owner of the car to be Pat Barrett, the county attorney and prominent member of the Lexington Citizens’ Council. His fifteen-year-old son Don had driven the car. In an article printed November 10, 1960, Smith included in the article a picture of the burning cross and rejected the notion that the act was an “innocent Halloween prank of high school boys.” In a November 17 article, she argued that young Barrett did not bare all the blame, but he was an example of a problem “of what has become a community problem.” While convinced the boys did not intend physical violence, their

²⁴ Ibid., 4 August 1960.

²⁵ Ibid., 22 October 1960.

act was still gross and psychologically devastating. She wrote, “Theirs was an intimidation much worse, a violation of the spirit, designed to incite mental and spiritual anguish.” She concluded, “The cross was burned on my lawn this time. Next time it could be yours.”²⁶

By 1960, the white establishment had scandalized Smith and forced her to recognize the kinds of conditions African Americans in Mississippi had faced for generations. Chalmers Archer, a Green Beret in the 1960s and later a college administrator, wrote a memoir about being black and growing up in Holmes County in the 1930s and 1940s. He spoke of the constant humiliation, the various ways of discrimination, and the ever present of violence African Americans had to face in towns like Lexington. Because of her editorial stance, Smith also had started to see the true face of Jim Crow. The belief in white supremacy would not allow for freedom of expression or critical self-introspection. Since 1954, Smith had faced a libel suit, an economic boycott, societal ostracism, character assassination in the *Herald*, and an act of psychological terrorism. All of this came because she had mildly questioned and criticized the tactics of Jim Crow segregation. In one sense, the cross burning actually energized her. A few weeks after the episode, she wrote to her colleague Hodding Carter, Jr., and said, “I think now I don’t have to hold back at all in any thing I want to say. They’ve done everything they possibly could to put me out of business. They have not succeeded and they are not going too [sic], I am certain.”²⁷

²⁶ Ibid., 11, 17 November 1960.

²⁷ Chalmers Archer, Jr., *Growing Up Black in Rural Mississippi: Memories of a Family Heritage of a Place* (New York; Walker and Company, 1992); Hazel Brannon Smith to Hodding Carter, Jr., 2

Despite her confidence, it did appear that those supporting massive resistance were winning in 1960. The boycott took away most of her advertising and had submerged her papers in a pool of red ink. She wrote in December 22, 1960 “Again, for the second year in a row for us, it has not been a successful year. Nor did we expect it to be.”²⁸

To make matters worse, the state’s white voters elected lawyer Ross Barnett as governor in November 1959. Barnett did everything in his power to bolster Jim Crow in Mississippi during his four years in office. During his tenure, Barnett strengthened the Mississippi Sovereignty Commission. The state legislature had created the organization in 1956 to counteract the implications of the *Brown* decision from both federal activity and local activists. Before Barnett took office, it remained a small agency. His inauguration as governor changed everything. Under his administration (1960-1963), the Sovereignty Commission grew to be an invasive intelligence-gathering agency. Subsidized by taxpayer money, the organization covertly scrutinized people thought to be involved in civil rights activities. States officials then used this information to form strategies to thwart civil rights activity as well as publicly smear the reputations of the participants. During the Barnett tenure, the state legislature allocated the Sovereignty Commission a budget of over \$350,000. The agency in turn used its funds to subsidize local Citizens’ Council chapters ranging from \$2,000 to \$5,000 a month.²⁹

As can be imagined, the *Herald* and Smith looked at that cooperation of the Sovereignty Commission and the Citizens’ Council from opposite ends of the spectrum.

December 1960, “Correspondence, 1956-1960,” Hodding Carter and Betty Werlein Carter Papers, Mitchell Library, Mississippi State University.

²⁸ *Lexington Advertiser*, 22 December 1960.

²⁹ Sarah Rowe Simms, “The Mississippi State Sovereignty Commission: An Agency History,” *Journal of Mississippi History*, 56 (Spring 1999), 29-30, 38-39.

The *Herald* vociferously defended the cooperative effort. A January 31, 1961 article in the Jackson *Clarion Ledger* reported on a lawsuit brought by four Mississippians calling for the federal court to end the Sovereignty Commission subsidies to the Citizens' Council. The piece noted that that the financial link between the two organizations had split the state's editors. Jack Shearer, the editor of the *Herald*, gave an interview for the article. He fully supported the financial cooperation. Shearer said the two agencies worked together to counteract the bad publicity brought by civil rights agitation. The Holmes editor rejected the lawsuit and said it was "aimed at the destruction of states' rights and state sovereignty. This ill-conceived and dastardly assault on the sovereign rights of Mississippi might well go down in state history as a deed of infamy."³⁰

Smith, on the other hand, blasted this unholy union. She saw the combination of private organization and state agency as joint tools of oppression. In many columns throughout 1961 she rebuked the melding of the two groups. A March 27 column summed up her views. She wrote,

If the privately-financed Citizens' Council wants to hire spies to go around checking on people that is their affair as long as they can get away it. But when the State Sovereignty Commission, supported with all our tax money to a tune of a \$350,000 budget, starts cooperating with these spy activities of the Citizens' Council, then it is time to call an immediate halt.³¹

Smith noted that many "free citizens of Mississippi" had their reputations ruined but they were afraid to speak up. Already the veteran of a seven year

³⁰ Jackson *Clarion Ledger*, 31 January 1961.

³¹ *Lexington Advertiser*, 27 March 1961; for other columns addressing the Sovereignty Commission and the Citizens' Council, see 9, 16, 23 February, 27 April, 4, 11 May, 1961.

struggle with the white establishment, Smith refused to keep quiet. She went on and demanded,

But the time is here when the freedom of all Mississippi people is threatened by the Citizens' Councils and the state Sovereignty Commission – and there are few people who will deny it. It is time for everyone to speak out and oppose this violation of our basic rights and freedom as American citizens. This monstrous thing will destroy our state and us as we know and love it, if we do not summon the courage not only to lift our voices in protest but to fight it with every honorable means at our disposal. Our freedom is being taken from us in Mississippi not by Communist Russia, Nazi Germany or any other totalitarian country or philosophy – but by our own home grown variety of fascism, Mississippi born and nurtured. It should also be destroyed here.³²

Smith had good reason to fear and denounce this combination. The Lexington Citizens' Council and the Sovereignty Commission were keeping tabs on her. A perusal of the Sovereignty Commission files online database brought up ninety-eight files on Smith. Smith's main nemesis in this cabal was a man named Wilburn Hooker. Hooker ran his own insurance agency in Lexington, and he served as a major thorn in Smith's side. He held multiple advantageous positions through which he attacked the Lexington editor. Hooker served as an active member of the Lexington Citizens' Council as well as the State Executive Council of the Citizens' Council. He also owned stock in the *Holmes County Herald* while also representing Holmes County in the state legislature. Finally, Hooker held a position on the executive committee of the Sovereignty Commission.³³

The Sovereignty Commission kept multiple reports and letters addressing the problem that Smith had become for the white establishment in Holmes County. In July,

³² Ibid., 27 March 1961.

³³ The Mississippi Sovereignty Commission files can be found in the Mississippi Department of Archives and History database: http://mdah.state.ms.us/arrec/digital_archives/sovcom/index.php; Hooker's credentials are mentioned in Mark Newman, "Hazel Brannon Smith," 75.

1960, Hooker wrote a letter about the editor to Sovereignty Commission Investigator Tom Scarbrough. Hooker included a number of news clippings on Smith to better inform the investigator and his surveillance. In March, 1961, just days before Smith wrote her editorial blasting the union of the commission and the Citizens' Council, Tom Scarbrough sent in a report on civil rights activity in Holmes County. Scarbrough recounted a March 10 meeting with Hooker and other leading officials in the county including the Circuit Clerk, the Tax Assessor, the Sheriff, and the Superintendent of Education. Sheriff Andrew Smith told the investigator that the activities of groups like the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP) was at a "low ebb." Scarbrough commented, "The sheriff thought the Citizens' Council of Holmes County had done a lot toward neutralizing NAACP activities as well as certain white agitators in Holmes County." The latter reference clearly pointed to Smith. Scarbrough reported that Hooker and others thought "racial conditions were in good shape in the county." County leaders were also in agreement concerning their enmity toward the editor. Scarbrough wrote, "Everyone whom I talked to considered Hazel Smith, a white female, a trouble maker and integrationist."³⁴

Smith went a long way in confirming this opinion with the kinds of editorials she was writing by the spring of 1961. In April, Smith wrote an editorial entitled "Must Racial Turmoil Come to Mississippi." She uttered a statement that both shocked her readers and confirmed what many already thought about her. She called for "repealing of the statutory laws on the books that require forced segregation." Smith tried to convince

³⁴Wilburn Hooker to Tom Scarbrough, 25 July 1960, Mississippi Sovereignty Commission, SCR id# 10-36-0-7-1-1-1; Tom Scarbrough Report, 29 March 1960, (SCR id#) 2-54-1-50-1-1-1.

her readers that they could have their cake and eat it too. She argued that removing “discriminatory laws” did not mean “local customs and traditions” would be overthrown. Instead, “Racial preference would still prevail. Discriminating Negroes prefer their own kind just as discriminating white people do.”³⁵

Smith believed that like-minded black and white Mississippians could work together to find solutions. As Mark Newman notes, upon being rejected by the white establishment, Smith reached out to more moderate groups. In 1961, Smith attended an organization meeting of the Mississippi Council on Human Relations. There she mingled with black luminaries like Mississippi NAACP leader Aaron Henry. With the boycott taking away her advertising and much of her printing business, Smith had published many NAACP publications and other black periodicals since 1958. In Smith’s mind, this was just a way to make money.³⁶

In reality, her public associations and her choice of printing jobs reveal how far Smith had moved from the mainstream of white thought. She still maintained that she never had advocated integration, but here was a bold call for formal discrimination to end. In her heart of hearts, she may have remained a segregationist, but in the minds of most of her readers, Smith had laid down the gauntlet for an integrated society. This perpetual call “I never advocated integration” belied the fact that her editorials consistently called for equal justice, fair treatment, freedom of expression and

³⁵ *Lexington Advertiser*, 13 April 1961.

³⁶ Mark Newman, “Hazel Brannon Smith and Holmes County, Mississippi, 1936-1964,” 78; In a letter published in the *Holmes County Herald*, 18 January 1962, Chester Marshall explained to Jack Shearer that one of the reasons he left Smith’s employ and helped form the *Herald* because he noticed that Smith received revenue “from sources which I considered detrimental to my way of thinking.” He said he was asked by Smith “to print literature and commercial printing for the NAACP there in the *Advertiser* shop. I refused.”

association, and racial harmony. The seven years of pressure by her white peers forced her to re-evaluate her views and pushed her toward a more enlightened view concerning race relations in America. By twenty-first century standards, Smith comes across as fairly conservative while at the same time heroic. What matters most is how friends and enemies alike viewed her in 1961. For African Americans, Smith's call for the end to formal discrimination made her a unique ally. For her white peers in Holmes County, her mild remonstrance against Jim Crow came across as apocalyptic. To people like Wilburn Hooker, Smith's words and actions threatened to destabilize the axis on which his world rotated. For that reason, Hooker and others in the county determined to crush Smith however possible.

While Smith encountered determined opposition, she also possessed equally ardent supporters. To counter the advertising boycott, Smith's friend, Hodding Carter, Jr., started a committee in July 1961 to raise money. Carter called the group the "Tri Anniversary Committee." It got its name from the twenty fifth anniversary of Smith's career in Mississippi, the one hundredth anniversary of the *Durant News*, and the one-hundredth twenty fifth anniversary of the *Lexington Advertiser*. Members of the committee included journalistic heavyweights Ralph McGill, publisher of the *Atlanta Constitution*, Mark Ethridge of the *Louisville Courier Journal*, J.N. Heskell, editor of the *Arkansas Gazette*, and Francis Harmon who had previously served as the editor of the Hattiesburg, Mississippi newspaper, *The American*. The group solicited donations and put broadsides in Smith's paper to raise funds. By October 1961, the committee raised over \$6,000. These ads included a full-page broadsides published in the *Lexington*

Advertiser. The *St. Petersburg (Florida) Times* published one in October which praised Smith for her quarter century “fight for people’s right to know and for law and order.”³⁷

In August 1961, Smith wrote a full-page advertisement, “25 Years of Service to Holmes County” printed in both Durant and Lexington papers. She included a “personal letter” to her readers. Basically, she sought to defend her editorial philosophy. She wrote that she did “not take myself too seriously or fancy myself a Savior of the people of Holmes County, or even your conscience.” Instead, she thought of herself as,

an honest editor who would truly serve the highest and best interest of the people who will not compromise conviction to support a popular cause known to be morally wrong just to incur popular favor or support.³⁸

Like anyone, Smith wanted to be liked and respected by her peers. She wanted her newspapers to make money. Smith’s commitment to her convictions, however, prevented these desires from being realized. She refused to support the community’s silent sanction of lawlessness, intimidation, and conformity. This battle had almost cost her everything. By 1961, Smith’s newspapers were wading in red ink. Despite the help of the Tri-Anniversary Committee, the \$6,000 served as a mere drop in the bucket. One committee member wrote to Hodding Carter and admitted that Smith’s papers needed a perpetual subsidy of “\$8,000 per year” but regarded that reality as extremely unlikely.³⁹

The fact that Smith received help from outsiders enraged many in Holmes County and only worsened her position. Jack Shearer, the editor of the *Herald*, led the verbal

³⁷ Mark Newman, Hazel Brannon Smith and Holmes County, Mississippi, 1936-1964, 71-72; *St. Petersburg Times* quote in *Lexington Advertiser*, 19 October 1961, quoted in Arthur Kaul, Hazel Brannon Smith and the *Lexington Advertiser*, 252.

³⁸ *Lexington Advertiser*, 3 August 1961, quoted in Arthur J. Kaul, “Hazel Brannon Smith and the *Lexington Advertiser*, 252.

³⁹ Mark Newman, “Hazel Brannon Smith and Holmes County Mississippi, 1936-1964,” 72.

assault against Smith. Throughout November, 1961, he ran several stories and editorials castigating Smith for collaborating with “out of state agitators masquerading as do gooders” who were trying to “buy themselves a voice in Holmes County.” In the November 9 *Herald*, Shearer put at the top of the front page “NOW, THE TRUTH IS OUT, EACH STAND IS CLEAR.” In Shearer’s mind, and the mind of many of his readers, Smith’s collaboration with the likes of Hodding Carter and the out of state editors stood as a betrayal of the people of Holmes County. Shearer argued that the members of the Tri Anniversary Committee were known for promoting integration. In Shearer’s mind, Smith’s papers had followed suit. He wrote, “The *Advertiser* and the *News* reflect the news of outsiders . . . who continually espouse the NAACP line.” In contrast, Shearer argued that, “The *Herald* is the voice of conservatism, states’ rights, and constitutional government.” He wanted his readers to reject Smith outright. According to Shearer, Smith thought of herself as “the big time editor,” but in actuality, she was duped by people who held views that were the antithesis of any respectable white person in Mississippi. For Shearer, the *Herald* was the “voice and property of Holmes County citizens and devoted Mississippians.”⁴⁰

Smith did not take the accusations lying down. The same day Shearer blasted her in the *Herald*, she fired right back. In a published letter, “Personal to Jack Shearer,” Smith accused the young editor of “taking our paper from the post office, as you know” and copying some the *Advertiser’s* stories. In regard to Shearer’s charges that Smith was bought off by integrationist editors, she tartly responded in the November 16 *Advertiser*,

⁴⁰ *Holmes County Herald*, 9 November 1961.

“We hate to call Jack a liar this week after calling him a thief last week, but that is exactly what we must do.”⁴¹

Shearer denied pilfering Smith’s papers and continued to charge Smith with being a paid agent of those who wanted to overthrow the southern way of life. In a November 23 editorial, “A Personal Message to Mrs. Hazel Smith,” he denied Smith’s charge that a small group of “bosses” were running the county. He reminded Smith that one hundred stockholders owned the *Herald*. For Shearer, his rival stood as the “would be boss” of Holmes County. He said that the Smith had a “golden opportunity” in Holmes County but that she “tried to dominate and tell practically everyone in the county, including your advertisers what they should do, you have lost here practically all of the friends which you ever made.” He charged that this loss of position infuriated Smith and that she wrote editorials “which would harass, discredit, and divide the people.” In Shearer’s view, this was the reason that many banded together to create the *Herald* in the first place. He opined that Smith had a “burning desire to get even with the people of Holmes County” and thus accepted the help of left leaning outsiders “in the forefront of the move to integrate the South”. In response to Smith and the efforts of her allies, Shearer vowed “Holmes County has never flinched to do that which is best for the friendship and the general good for all of her people, and she is not going to flinch now.” The *Herald* would lead the way “promoting those things which are best for all the people.” To add insult to injury, Shearer published a November 30 story with the headline “*Lexington Advertiser, Durant News* Receiving Assistance from Communist Front Organization.” The story revealed that Nelson Poyntner, the editor of the *St. Petersburg Times* belonged to the

⁴¹ *Lexington Advertiser*, 9, 16 November 1961.

National Citizens' for Political Action Committee. This group was considered a "major Communist front organization" according to a House on Un-American Activities Committee Report. Poyntner had paid for a full-page advertisement praising Smith back in October 1961.⁴²

To use a military term, Shearer and the stockholder's of the *Herald* considered their struggle with Smith as total war. This was a no holds barred effort to completely annihilate any good will remaining toward Smith in Holmes County in the hope that it would put her out of business. Smith's moderation and her criticism toward the methods of massive resistance put her beyond the pale. Shearer's reporting painted Smith as an outsider and a traitor. Seen as a cancer on the body politic, Shearer, his stockholders, and the majority of the readers of the *Herald*, wanted Smith excised.

While Shearer publicly assaulted Smith in the *Herald*, Wilburn Hooker took a more covert approach. In a December, 1961, Sovereignty Commission report, investigator Tom Scarbrough recounted another visit to Holmes County. Like before, he reported that Holmes County was bereft of civil rights activity. He reported that there were "no incidents of racial trouble in Holmes County for some time and things in general were unusually quiet." Upon talking to Hooker, Scarbrough noted that the one problem in the county was "Hazel Brannon Smith's continuous agitation through the newspaper she published in Lexington." Hooker revealed that he doubted that Smith had

⁴² *Holmes County Herald* 16, 23, 30 1961.

one paid subscriber in the county. He asked Scarbrough to give him every piece of information possible concerning organizations to which Smith belonged.”⁴³

A couple of weeks later, Hooker wrote Albert Jones, the Director of the Sovereignty Commission, and voiced his appreciation for the agency’s surveillance of Smith. Hooker wrote, “Albert you just don’t know how much the people of this county appreciate what you are doing in helping us expose this female crusading scalawag domiciled in our midst.” Scalawag was a moniker given to southern whites who joined the Republican Party after the Civil War and tried to help with Reconstruction. In white southern terms, scalawag meant traitor. In closing, Hooker told Jones that he appreciated being informed of Smith’s meeting with an NAACP group in Jackson. He asked Jones to continue to keep him advised “of this traitorous group”.⁴⁴

The meeting that Hooker referred to took place in front of the office of the *Mississippi Free Press* in Jackson, Mississippi on December 15, 1961. It involved Walter and Hazel Brannon Smith delivering copies of the *Mississippi Free Press* to Medgar Evers, the Field Secretary of the NAACP, and his attorney, a white man named William Higgs. Sovereignty Commission Director Albert Jones and an investigator named A.L. Hopkins covertly witnessed the brief get-together.⁴⁵

For Holmes County officials, this meeting only cemented the notion that Smith was public enemy number one. Using the information submitted by the Sovereignty

⁴³ Tom Scarbrough Report, 4 December 1961, Sovereignty Commission Report (SCR id #) 2-54-58-2-1-1-1.

⁴⁴ Wilburn Hooker to Albert Jones, 16 December 1961, Sovereignty Commission Report, SCR ID # 2-54-1-59-1-1-1.

⁴⁵ Surveillance Report, 21 December 1961; Sworn Affidavit, Albert Jones and A.L. Hopkins, Hinds County Court, 2 January 1962 Sovereignty Commission Reports (SCR id #) 1-76-0-26-1-1-1, 3-76-0-11-1-1-1.

Commission investigators, Holmes officials enlisted the help of the Citizens' Council state executive committee (of which Hooker was a member) and put a plan in action. The Citizen's Council office in Greenwood sent photocopies of a sworn affidavit concerning Jones and Hopkins's testimony and a copy of the *Mississippi Free Press* to every legislator in the state house and to many in Holmes County. On January 4, 1962, Holmes County Senator T.M. Williams stood on the Senate floor and denounced Hazel Brannon Smith and the *Lexington Advertiser*. He told his colleagues, "If you read her newspaper you would know why we have the attitude we do toward her. We are no longer proud of her paper." The Senator admitted that Smith "was once respected" but she "had dictated all the policies of the county." He went on and blasted Smith by saying, "She was smart, shrewd, and we found out later—scheming." The combined efforts of the Sovereignty Commission, the Citizens' Council, and the leadership of Holmes County made it clear that by January of 1962, Smith and her newspapers represented a clear and present danger. In their mind, she was a traitor and a thorn in their side. She had to be humiliated in the most public way imaginable in order to neutralize her effectiveness.⁴⁶

If state and county leaders thought these actions would cow the editor, they were sadly mistaken. In the January 11, 1962 edition of the *Lexington Advertiser*, Smith unleashed a no holds barred defense of her actions and her editorial philosophy. She described the effort of Williams and the others as another effort to kick her out of the county through the use of "a vicious statewide smear campaign." In regards to printing the *Mississippi Free Press*, Smith admitted she put in a competitive bid and won the

⁴⁶ *Jackson Daily News*, 5 January 1962; *Jackson Clarion Ledger*, 5 January 1962.

contract. Smith tried to split hairs. She denied that an “integration meeting” took place. She said she just printed the paper, but she had nothing to do with its editing or content. She said the campaign against her came out of her eight-year battle with Holmes County leaders. Reminding her readers that the Citizens’ Council received money from the Sovereignty Commission, she then pointed out that Wilburn Hooker and T.M. Williams were prominent members of the Citizens’ Council in Holmes County and stockholders in the rival *Herald*. Hooker served on the executive committees of both the Sovereignty Commission and the Citizens’ Council. For Smith, this was a clear conspiracy by Holmes County leaders to put her out of business, because she refused “to take orders from or be controlled by the HC bosses, foremost of whom is Hooker.”⁴⁷

Battered from almost every avenue of public life, Smith fought back with her best weapon, her typewriter. In the same issue of the *Advertiser*, Smith printed a front-page editorial entitled, “Personal and Press Freedom At Stake.” She expressed horror that the state legislature had been subverted and used to “launch a campaign of criminal conspiracy and abuse against a private citizen.” The perpetrators were “a tax supported agency of the state and a professional hate-peddling organization which illegally has its hands in the pockets of every tax payer.” For Smith, the state had evolved into a dictatorship in the name of white supremacy. She saw it as her duty as a freedom loving American to fight back. She wrote, “I claim my right as a free American and as a citizen of a once free state to be heard. It is not for myself alone that I speak, but for all freedom loving citizens who do not want the Citizens’ Council to take over our state.” She asked her fellow Mississippians to wake up and immediately stop the funding of the Citizens’

⁴⁷ *Lexington Advertiser*, 11 January 1962.

Council by the Sovereignty Commission. Speaking from her own experience, she wrote that the spying of the Sovereignty Commission and the dictatorial conformity expected by the Citizens' Council was

a menace to every citizen and is to be no less feared than the Gestapo of Hitler's Germany and the paid informants of the Communist conspiracy. If we lose our personal freedom, what does it matter what our masters call themselves.⁴⁸

Smith rejected the idea that she had done anything "illegally or morally wrong" and she said the people of Holmes County knew it and the informed newspapers and intelligent citizens of the state knew it as well. Naively, she tried to bypass what was foremost in her readers mind. She said, "the real battle is not an integration-segregation controversy at all." In Smith's mind, the battle stemmed from the Byrd/Randall shooting of 1954. Instead of an integration-segregation controversy, Smith offered that it was "the question of the right of a free press, the right of a newspaper to print the truth and make fair comment."⁴⁹

With nothing to lose, Smith named names concerning her enemies. She said that Holmes County leaders, Senator T.M. Williams, former state representative Edwin White, Edwin Moses, and Wilburn Hooker worked with former bootleggers to persecute her. In Smith's mind, the bootleggers wanted revenge for her law and order campaign against them in the late 1940s and early 1950s. She took another shot at Wilburn Hooker. She reminded her readers that he was an elected representative, and as such, he did not

⁴⁸ Ibid., 11 January 1962.

⁴⁹ Ibid., 11 January 1962

have the right to persecute a private citizen. In the editor's opinion, "his position was truly indefensible."⁵⁰

Smith concluded the long editorial by reminding her readers that economically speaking, the state of Mississippi "was on the threshold of her brightest hour." That being said, she said, "but man does not live by bread alone." In the midst of the Cold War, she reminded her readers that people must have personal freedom, or they might as well live in a Communist controlled country. She beseeched her readers to remember that Mississippians valued spiritual values, and these values "compel us to have a decent regard for the dignity of all men and live our lives and build our society on a policy of love, not hate, on faith and hope, not fear and despair." Then she dropped the bombshell, namely, Jim Crow had to go. She wrote, "We cannot hold down more than 42 percent of our entire state population without staying down ourselves – and all intelligent people know it." The editor who wrote in 1943, "This is white man's country, and both races know it," now called for the dismantling of Jim Crow segregation.⁵¹

By 1962, Smith had reached the point of no return. The white establishment, many of whom were former friends, smeared her reputation and threatened her livelihood because she refused to condone the tactics of massive resistance. Between 1954 and 1962, she came to see her own struggle for civil liberties as a component of the African American struggle for civil rights. From 1962 on, as black Mississippians gained footholds for social justice, Smith felt that she had no choice but to aid the movement

⁵⁰ Ibid., 11 January 1962

⁵¹ Ibid., 8 July, 1943, 11 January 1962.

CHAPTER VII

“THE LIBERAL HAZEL BRANNON SMITH”: SUPPORTING THE CIVIL RIGHTS MOVEMENT

“Can you imagine Lexington without the *Lexington Advertiser*?
Or Holmes County without Hazel Brannon Smith? Why, they would put
your eyes out. . . and the white people, they would put their eyes out too!”

Arenia C. Mallory
Lexington Advertiser, 25 November 1965

Like the Earth’s orbit around the Sun, Hazel Brannon Smith’s struggle for civil liberties revolved around the much greater struggle African Americans underwent for basic civil rights. After the *Brown* decision in 1954, Smith found herself in an ever increasingly precarious position. She believed in Jim Crow segregation, but she also believed in freedom of speech, Christian brotherhood, and adherence to law and order. As African Americans across the South pushed for civil rights in the decade after *Brown*, they faced intense white backlash led by groups like the White Citizens’ Council. The oppression included economic intimidation, public ostracism through the media, and unabashed violence. Smith rejected these tactics and received backlash herself. The intense hostile response forced her to re-evaluate the rightness of Jim Crow society and her place in it. Smith came to see Jim Crow’s deep inequality and undemocratic nature as its defenders not only attacked African American activists, but they also turned upon her and tried to devour her reputation and livelihood. By 1961, the backlash grew so intense that Smith demanded the abolition of segregation laws. The pressure only

intensified as blacks continued to push for civil rights and Smith pleaded for white Mississippians to embrace sanity, brotherhood, and justice.¹

As John Dittmer and Charles M. Payne both point out in their works on the Mississippi movement, African Americans organized and pushed for civil rights in the aftermath of *Brown*, but faced overwhelming pressure from the Citizens' Council, and then later, from that organization tag-teaming with the Mississippi State Sovereignty Commission. Black Mississippians had made some small gains by 1960, but for the most part, white backlash had overwhelmed the effort. In one paragraph, Dittmer encapsulates the success of the white establishment in neutralizing black resistance as well as bludgeoning white moderate criticism. He wrote,

What it all comes down to is that in the mid-1950s white supremacists in Mississippi had a specific program: to maintain the status quo in race relations, whatever the cost. . . What was happening was in many ways a replay of the year 1875: the Citizens' Council was busy implementing its own 'Mississippi Plan'; the government in Washington was refusing to get involved; the new scalawags were being stunned into silence; and blacks were force to run for cover.²

The Mississippi Plan of 1875 referred to systematic white violence against African Americans and sympathetic whites (called Scalawags) in order to overthrow Reconstruction in Mississippi a decade after the Civil War.

Sovereignty Commission reports from counties like Holmes in 1961 bear out Dittmer's assertion. In his March 1961 report from Holmes County, investigator Tom

¹ For background on the black position in Mississippi in the decade after *Brown* see Charles M. Payne, *I've Got the Light of Freedom: The Organizing Tradition and the Mississippi Freedom Struggle* (Berkeley, California: University of California Press, 1995), 35-42; John Dittmer, *Local People: The Struggle for Civil Rights in Mississippi* (Urbana, Illinois: University of Illinois Press, 1994), 41-69; Anthony Lewis, *Portrait of a Decade: The Second American Revolution* (New York: Random House, 1964), 204-210.

² John Dittmer, *Local People*, 69.

Scarborough noted that officials in the county considered NAACP activity at a “low ebb,” and that “race relations were in good shape in the county.” What was the catalyst for this quiet state? He wrote, “The sheriff thought the Citizens’ Council of Holmes County had done a lot toward neutralizing NAACP activities as well as certain white agitators in Holmes County.” In December 1961, Scarborough again met with Holmes leaders and reported that there had been “no incidents of racial trouble for quite some time and things in general had been unusually quiet” but “All officials were skeptical of what might happen in the future, however.” For the leaders of Holmes County, two threats loomed. First, African Americans in the county might become active. Second, there already existed the reality of “Hazel Brannon Smith’s continuous agitation.” These could make for an explosive combination.³

The white establishment’s fears soon came to be realized. Out of state black activists came to Holmes County and planted seeds for protest in 1962 that started bearing fruit by 1963. Even more ominous, James Meredith, a black Air Force veteran, sought to integrate the University of Mississippi in the fall of 1962. In both events, Hazel Brannon Smith used her newspapers to call for tolerance and obedience to the law.

James Meredith grew up in Attala County, which is separated from Holmes County’s eastern border by the Big Black River. Finding little economic opportunity in the county seat of Kosciusko, Meredith enrolled in the U.S. Air Force in 1951. In 1960, he enrolled at the all black Jackson State College. There he met Medgar Evers, the Mississippi field secretary of the NAACP, and the young Air Force veteran shared with

³ Tom Scarborough Report, 29 March 1961, Mississippi Sovereignty Commission Report, (SCR id# 2-54-1-50-1-1-1); Tom Scarborough Report, 4 December 1961, Sovereignty Commission Report (SCR id #) 2-54-58-2-1-1-1.

Evers his plan to attempt to integrate the University of Mississippi. Evers offered the NAACP's help. Evers urged Meredith to contact the NAACP about giving him legal aid. In his January 29, 1961 letter to the NAACP, Meredith wrote, "My long-cherished ambition has been to break the monopoly on rights and privileges held by the whites of the state of Mississippi." Meredith's attempt "to break the monopoly" brought Mississippi under a searing spotlight in 1962. After much legal wrangling the U.S. Fifth Circuit Court of Appeals ordered the University to admit Meredith on September 10, 1962, the court declared that Ole Miss had no other choice but to admit Meredith.⁴

During the months while the legal wrangling was going on, Mississippi officials and most of its media outlets banged the drum of resistance. Mississippi Governor Ross Barnett, an avowed segregationist and open ally of the White Citizens' Council, sought to rally and fortify resistance to any attempt in Mississippi to overthrow segregation. As federal courts moved the state closer to the reality of integration, Barnett went on statewide television and vowed "no school will be integrated in Mississippi as long as I am governor." He demanded the resignation of any state official would not risk imprisonment, saying, "We will not drink from this cup of genocide." The state's largest daily newspapers, the *Jackson Daily News* and the *Jackson Clarion Ledger* lauded

⁴ John Dittmer, *Local People*, 139; James Meredith, *Three Years in Mississippi*, (Bloomington, Indiana: Indiana University Press, 1966), 55-56, Charles Eagles, *The Price of Defiance: James Meredith and the Integration of Ole Miss* (Chapel Hill, North Carolina: University of North Carolina Press, 2009), 261-275; See also William Doyle, *An American Insurrection: James Meredith and the Battle of Oxford, Mississippi, 1962* (New York: Anchor/Random House, 2003).

Barnett's stance. These papers described his stand as "courageous" and told its readers "We stand with Governor Barnett."⁵

Hazel Brannon Smith and the *Holmes County Herald* also weighed into the fray. The contrast over their coverage was striking. Smith wrote on September 13, 1962 that she did not personally want to see Ole Miss integrated, but it was obvious that state officials had to obey federal law. She ridiculed Governor Barnett's vow to close the university before allowing integration. Jack Shearer weighed in for the *Herald*. He wrote in late September that "The *Herald* commends the actions of public officials who have made a stand for state sovereignty and principle."⁶

With tensions ratcheted up to peak levels, violence erupted on the Oxford campus on the night of September 30. While federal Marshals had Meredith sequestered secretly in a dorm room, a crowd of white students and adults attacked other U.S. Marshals positioned around the Lyceum, the school's main administration building. After an all night battle, including Molotov cocktails, gunfire, and tossed brickbats, the morning dawned with burned out vehicles, several people wounded, and two dead. President John F. Kennedy had been forced to send in over 5,000 troops to restore order.⁷

Smith placed the blame for the riot at the feet of Governor Barnett and the Citizens' Council for poisoning the atmosphere with racial hatred and setting the tone of resistance. She concluded that Mississippians should hang their heads in shame over the fiasco. She wrote,

⁵ John Dittmer, *Local People*, 139; Susan Weill, "Mississippi's Daily Press in Three Crises," in David R. Davies, ed. *The Press and Race: Mississippi Journalists Confront the Movement* (Jackson, Mississippi: University Press of Mississippi, 2001), 30-32.

⁶ *Lexington Advertiser*, 13 September 1962, *Holmes County Herald*, 27 September 1962

⁷ Charles Eagles, *The Price of Defiance*, 340-370.

No infant now living will ever see the day when the stain is completely removed from the name of our proud state. . . We must face the unpleasant fact that now we are regarded throughout the civilized world as an ignorant, narrow, bigoted, intolerant, people with little regard for human rights and Christian values.⁸

Jack Shearer and the *Herald* had a completely different take. He blasted the federal government, and he blasted Smith. He said sending in federal troops represented an “invasion” and the “brute force of a powerful central government.” He described Smith as the local threat and said she was “dedicated to the destruction of those high principles which have motivated our state’s resistance at Oxford.” Shearer rejected that idea that Mississippians had anything to be ashamed for, except maybe that of tolerating editors like Hazel Brannon Smith. Shearer vowed it was time “for responsible Holmes County citizens to say ‘no more.’” He noted that hundreds of people in the county had refused to take Smith’s papers and urged “all other citizens of Holmes County to take a stand in this matter.” Shearer argued that all who cherished “those lofty principles to which our state leaders have pledged their support” had no choice but to quit reading Smith’s papers, the *Advertiser* and the *News*. In the following weeks, he went further and justified the riot at Ole Miss. He blamed the federal government. He declared that since the administration of Franklin Roosevelt, the federal government “had bred a certain feeling of contempt for ‘the law’ amongst white southerners.” Shearer also blamed the U.S. Supreme Court had violated precedents by pushing unwanted laws on the South. Thus, Shearer described the Ole Miss rioters as victims of government oppression and compared them to freedom loving Hungarians who were crushed by Russian tanks in

⁸ *Lexington Advertiser*, 4 October 1962.

1956. According to Shearer, the blood shed during the riot stained the hands of President Kennedy and his “trigger happy nervous marshals.”⁹

To further demonstrate how far outside the mainstream Smith had moved by 1962, one needs to look no further than the perspective of two twenty-year-old white males from Holmes County who attended Ole Miss in 1962. A week after the riot, the *Herald* published a firsthand report from William “Billy” Ellis, a Lexington native. Ironically, Ellis would later become Smith’s banker. The twenty-year-old viewed the riot in terms of “federal encroachment.” He said the “orderly crowd which was dispersing was viciously and without provocation attacked by the federal forces.” In Ellis’s mind, “The viciousness of the federal forces will always leave a black mark on Mississippi and the entire nation.”¹⁰

In the aftermath of the Ole Miss riot, reporters descended upon Oxford. One *New York Times Magazine* contributor interviewed an Ole Miss Fraternity boy named Don Barrett, who was from Holmes County. His father was Pat Barrett, the county attorney for Holmes County and one of the major stockholders in the *Herald*. The younger Barrett had taken part in the cross burning in Smith’s yard in 1960. Asked about his racial views, the young man expressed ideas that more than likely represented the sentiments of most Holmes County whites and gave insight into why Smith became so alienated. Barrett told the reporter “I feel, as do most of the white population of the South, that the Negro is inherently unequal.” He went on to describe blacks in Africa as unlearned savages and said they would still be in ignorance, “If they hadn’t been taken over by the

⁹ *Holmes County Herald*, 4, 11, 18 October 1962.

¹⁰ Billy Ellis, quoted in the *Holmes County Herald*, 4 October 1962.

white man.” For those who still lived in Africa, Barrett said they remained savage because “they’re still eating each other.” According to Barrett, the problem with the South was not the white man. He told the reporter, “the white South has taken the Neegra [sic], fed, clothed, taught them how to speak and wear clothes and taught him Christianity. Still, look at ‘em [sic], their illegitimacy rate.” Barrett then told the reporter that he feared that blacks would come to dominate if given equality, and that meant white women would suffer. He said, “If the social system is thrown out of kilter, as moderates would do, there would be more danger than there is now under the patient hand of white leadership.” He promised to take up arms “to protect our women.” He ended the interview by defending the racial status quo and said he would not eat with a black person or use the courtesy titles of Mr. or Miss because “it’s not socially acceptable, it’s not done – any more than I’d cut more than one piece of steak at a time or tuck my napkin under my chin.”¹¹

By late 1962, it was obvious that Smith belonged in a different universe than most of her peers in Holmes County. She was one of just a handful of Mississippi editors who called for state officials to acquiesce and admit Meredith. This included Hodding Carter III of the Greenville *Delta Democrat-Times*. The younger Carter had succeeded his father, Hodding Carter, Jr., as editor in 1962. Having more local support, the Carters received pressure for their views but still managed to make a profit from their paper. Ira Harkey, owner of the Gulf Coast paper, the Pascagoula *Chronicle*, won a Pulitzer Prize in 1963 for his Ole Miss editorials. Like Smith, he came under great pressure, including

¹¹ Don Barrett, *New York Times Magazine*, 10 November 1962, quoted in Anthony Lewis, *Portrait of a Decade: The Second American Revolution* (New York: Random House, 1964), 207-208.

being shot at, and decided to leave the state for his own safety in late 1963. He sold his newspaper for over a million dollars. Having little local support, and increasing in debt instead of revenue, Smith continued to fight on.¹²

African Americans in Holmes County faced a much deeper and more intense battle, but they too pushed back. The effort to gain civil rights came not from the leadership of national leaders like Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr., but from idealistic young college students and a group of middle aged farmers. In February 1960, four black college freshmen from the University of North Carolina A & T staged a sit-in at a segregated lunch counter in Greensboro, North Carolina. This act of defiance spurred thousands of other students got involved. With the help of the Congress of Racial Equality, a civil rights group formed in New York in the 1940s, dozens of black and white college students took part in the “Freedom Rides” in 1961. They rode interstate buses and tried to integrate bus stations in Mississippi and Alabama. They faced violence, and some were imprisoned for a short time. College students belonging to a civil rights organization called the Student Non-Violent Coordinating Committee (SNCC, pronounced *snick*) took part in the freedom rides. By 1962, SNCC workers shifted tactics and focused on voter registration in states like Mississippi. By the fall of that year, workers with SNCC had established a beachhead in Greenwood, Mississippi in Leflore County, just north of Holmes. Despite facing arson, beatings, and arrests, the activists

¹² Susan Weill, *The Press and Race*, 32-33; Ann Waldron, *Hodding Carter: The Reconstruction of a Racist* (Chapel Hill, NC: Algonquin Books, 1993), 262-263; Ira Harkey, *The Smell of Burning Crosses: An Autobiography of a Mississippi Newspaperman* (Jacksonville, Illinois: Harris-Wolfe and Col, 1967), 19.

pushed on. Their efforts interested a group of Holmes County farmers who lived in the delta hamlet of Mileston.¹³

Mileston was a unique community. Many of the African American farmers living there had acquired land through a New Deal program in the 1930s. There they built their own community, an independent enclave from white domination. Their relative economic independence bred a strong sense of self-reliance and pride in these farmers. Upon hearing of the work of SNCC in nearby Greenwood, some of the Mileston farmers went and talked to the college workers in early 1963. The SNCC workers taught citizenship classes which sought to familiarize the willing men and women with the mechanics of voter registration.¹⁴

By the Spring of 1963, fourteen Mileston men and women were ready to test the waters. On April 9, 1963, the “First Fourteen,” as they were later called, along with several SNCC workers, traveled to the courthouse in Lexington in order to register to vote. Word of the attempt had gotten to the Federal Bureau of Investigation (FBI) a few days before, and the FBI had informed Sheriff Andrew Smith. The fourteen Mileston men and women faced a gauntlet of Smith and other city officials, thirty auxiliary policemen, and police dogs. Sheriff Smith struck one of the SNCC workers and tried to intimidate the group. When told the group only wanted to register, the Sheriff bellowed, “All right now, who will be first? Who will be first?” A short, squat and powerful, and

¹³The standard work on the Freedom Riders is Ray Arsenault, *Freedom Riders: 1961 and the Struggle for Racial Justice* (New York: Oxford 2006); See also James Loewen and Charles Sallis, eds., *Mississippi: Conflict and Change* (New York: Random House, 1974), 266; Charles Payne, *I've Got the Light of Freedom*, 278-283; John Dittmer, *Local People*, 190-191.

¹⁴Jay MacLeod, “Introduction: Racism, Resistance, and the Origins of the Holmes County Movement” in *Minds Stayed on Freedom: The Civil Rights Struggle in the Rural South, An Oral History* (Boulder, Colorado: Westview Press, 1991), 15. This work contains oral histories of people from Mileston and other parts of Holmes County who were the pioneers of the civil rights movement in Holmes County.

barely literate farmer named Hartman Turnbow stepped up and said, “Me, Hartman Turnbow, will be first.” Turnbow was allowed to enter the courthouse and eventually tried to register. The Circuit Clerk failed Turnbow and the rest in the days that followed. Applicants were not only asked basic voting questions, but ridiculous questions like “How many bubbles are in a bar of soap?” Regardless, blacks in Holmes County had taken the all-important first step.¹⁵

On the day the fourteen farmers tried to register, Hazel Brannon Smith situated herself in the courthouse to witness the event. According to Sovereignty Commission investigator Virgil Downing, Smith did more than simply stand by. According to the testimony of several county officials, Downing reported that Smith conversed with applicants like Turnbow and told them, “This is what you should have been doing a long time ago.” She also commended the applicants for their courage. As far as her news coverage, she reported on the front page the effort of the Mileston farmers, but made no editorial comment.¹⁶

The *Herald* published a front-page article, “Quiet Prevails Here after Tense Situation” along with pictures and a complete list of participants. Sue Lorenzi, a white activist who came to Holmes County in 1964, noted that having their names and photos

¹⁵ Hartman Turnbow interview in Howell Raines, *My Soul Is Rested: The Story of the Civil Rights Movement in the Deep South* (New York: Penguin, 1977), 261; Jay MacLeod, *Minds Stayed on Freedom*, 26.

¹⁶ Virgil Downing Report, Mississippi Sovereignty Commission Report, SCR id # 2-54-1-77-3-1-1.

in the paper set the Mileston farmers up for reprisals from angry whites. The white response was not long in coming.¹⁷

One month after trying to register, Turnbow came under attack. One early May morning, he awoke to an explosion and the screams of his wife. Someone had thrown Molotov cocktails through his front window. Turnbow ushered his wife, Bee, and fourteen year old daughter out the back door. As the two women emerged from the house, they encountered two white men in the yard. The men let the women pass by. As Turnbow came out the door, the two men began shooting at him. To their surprise, Turnbow shot back with a .22 rifle he took from the house, forcing the assailants to flee in their car. After putting the fire out, Turnbow contacted several local SNCC workers who in turn contacted the U.S. Justice Department. Robert Moses, one of the SNCC workers, took pictures of the fire damaged home. Later in the day Sheriff Andrew Smith arrived and promptly arrested Turnbow and charged him with arson. He also arrested Moses and several other SNCC workers for “impeding an investigation.” The Justice Department intervened and eventually got all the charges dropped.¹⁸

Once again, the *Lexington Advertiser* and the *Holmes County Herald* wildly differed in how they covered the attack on Turnbow’s home. Smith railed against the attack as a “vicious and criminal act.” She mocked Sheriff Andrew Smith for arresting Turnbow and the SNCC workers. She remarked that the only crime Turnbow had committed what that of “trying to vote.” Jack Shearer had left the *Herald* in late 1962 in

¹⁷ Holmes County Herald, 11 April 1963; Susan Lorenzi Sojourner and Cheryl Reitan, *Thunder of Freedom: Black Leadership and the Transformation of 1960s Mississippi* (Lexington, Kentucky: University Press of Kentucky, 2013), 30.

¹⁸ *Lexington Advertiser*, 9, 30 May 1963; “Home Set Afire by Bombs, Mississippi Negro Asserts,” *New York Times*, 9 May 1963; Hartman Turnbow interview in *My Soul is Rested*, 263.

order to attend graduate school. Paul Tardy replaced him as editor. In response to the Turnbow event, Tardy published a front-page editorial entitled “Who’s Excited?” He surmised that the fire was a “trumped up affair.” Tardy argued that since “the agitators failed in an effort to stir up real trouble in the recent voter registration” and that many blacks were not registering, the activists had “to do something to get them fired up again.” The *Herald* editor thought it strange that SNCC workers like Moses “happened” to be in the area and that the Justice Department responded so quickly. Thus, he surmised that Turnbow and the SNCC workers staged the event. In the classic Shakespearian denial, “the lady doth protest too much, methinks,” the *Herald* editor concluded that the firebombing was not a newsworthy event. He wrote,

There is no news story in this paper concerning the incident. There is nothing newsworthy about it. We say let ‘em [sic] throw their gasoline and have their fun, but we say, Justice Department, stay home until you are needed. All this fuss takes up too much of the time of our law officers and this newspaper. We have better things to do!¹⁹

Tardy missed his own contradiction. If the event was not newsworthy, then why post a front-page editorial at all? Obviously, Tardy and his stockholders felt they needed to post a rebuttal of what Smith was surely going to say.

By the summer of 1963, Smith found herself on a path of no return. She refused to confirm the intransigence of the county’s leaders, and she thought the best thing she could do was to inform the public of what was going on and hope that people would respond accordingly. Earlier in April 1963, Smith wrote that concerning the plight of black people in Mississippi, the white public had “not been informed, and much what

¹⁹ *Lexington Advertiser*, 9 May 1963; *Holmes County Herald*, 9 May 1963; William Shakespeare, *Hamlet*, Act III, Scene II.

they have been told is false, misleading or distorted.” Thus, she hoped that by exposing the true condition of what was going on in Mississippi and “the right people in this state learn the truth, we believe conditions will be changed.” For most in Holmes County, they saw themselves as the “right people” and Smith as the aberration.²⁰

With the majority of whites in Holmes County and across the state feeling under attack by what they termed “outside agitators,” the *Herald* reported any episode concerning African Americans from an antagonistic viewpoint. On the heels of the Turnbow bombing came the shooting death of Alfred Brown. According to the June 13, 1963 account on the front-page of the *Herald*, a white Lexington policeman on his evening rounds ran into Brown who appeared drunk. When the officer tried to apprehend Brown, he reportedly slashed at the officer with a knife, causing a small wound. The officer pulled out his pistol and shot Brown twice. The man soon died of his wounds. Reading the *Herald* account, the reader could only conclude about Brown that he black, drunk, and dangerous, and thus the shooting was justified.²¹

If the *Herald* had been the only paper in the county, then this would have served as the official story. Hazel Brannon Smith offered a completely different narrative. Whereas the *Herald* piece ran with the headline “Negro Killed Saturday by City Officer,” Smith’s front-page piece ran under the headline “Negro Veteran Killed by Officers.” Smith noted in the piece that Alfred Brown had served in World War II, he was the husband of a respected schoolteacher, and that he was the father of five children. Smith presented a totally different scenario that led to Brown’s death. According to

²⁰*Lexington Advertiser*, 25 April 1963;

²¹*Holmes County Herald*, 13 June 1963.

eyewitnesses who spoke to Smith, Brown had mental problems and had recently returned from receiving treatment at the Veterans' Hospital in Jackson. The night of the incident, two Lexington police officers spied Brown walking down the street. Eyewitnesses said one of the officers asked "What's wrong with you boy?" Brown replied, "Nothing." The two officers stopped Brown and tried to frisk him. Brown wore a bracelet on his wrist that notified the reader that he was a mental patient. Brown broke free from the officers and made it clear he had done nothing wrong and did not intend to go to jail. As one officer reached for his blackjack, Brown's cousin tried to intervene. He explained that Brown was a mental patient and needed to be taken home. Ignoring the request, the officer hit Brown in the head with the blackjack. Brown then pulled a knife and advanced on the policeman. The other officer was behind Brown and shot him in the back. As Brown lurched forward, the officer in front with the blackjack, pulled his weapon and fired, hitting Brown in the collarbone. As relatives and others tried to approach the wounded man and give him assistance, one officer threatened to shoot anyone who came near Brown. An ambulance was called and carried Brown to the hospital, but he died in route. According to Brown's uncle, the shooting victim did not drink.²²

Not satisfied with simply giving an account of the shooting, Smith weighed in on the event in her personal column. Believing the eyewitness accounts, Smith concluded that "the killing was senseless and could have been avoided by officers who either knew or cared what they were doing." She said no one faulted an officer who defended himself when threatened by a criminal, "But such was not the case on Saturday night." As she had done all of her career, Smith called for equal justice under the law, especially if the

²² *Lexington Advertiser*, 13 June 1963.

town was going to have any reality of “racial peace.” Smith called for a legitimate investigation of the shooting and “no ‘whitewash’ attempted.”²³

Based on what else happened in June, 1963, Smith’s hope for “racial peace” would not be realized for a long time. On the evening of June 11 1963, an assassin gunned down Medgar Evers, the Mississippi Field Secretary for the NAACP, as he got out of his car at his home in Jackson. Byron De La Beckwith, an avowed white supremacist, hid in the bushes across from the Evers’s home and shot the activist with a high-powered rifle. Evers’s wife, Myrlie, and her children ran outside and found the husband and father expiring on the carport drive. The World War II veteran had fought for civil rights since returning from military service in 1946. He had served as field secretary for the NAACP since 1955. Officials found De La Beckwith’s gun with his fingerprints on it near the scene of the murder. Ballistics proved the fatal bullet came from his rifle. He underwent two trials in 1964, and both resulted in hung juries. He would not be convicted of Evers’s murder until 1994.²⁴

How the largest members of the Mississippi press responded to Evers’s death contrasted greatly with Smith’s editorializing. The Hederman family owned the state’s two largest dailies, the *Jackson Daily News* and the *Jackson Clarion Ledger*. As historians David R. Davies and Judy Smith note, the murder of Evers gave both papers “a rare chance for the newspaper to show empathy, even in a restrained way, to a black

²³ Ibid., 13 June 1963.

²⁴ James W. Loewen and Charles Sallis, *Mississippi Conflict and Change* (New York: Random House/Pantheon, 267-268; John Dittmer, *Local People*, 165-166; Charles M. Payne, *I’ve Got the Light of Freedom*, 285-290; *MaryAnne Vollers, Ghosts of Mississippi: The Murder of Medgar Evers, the Trials of Byron De La Beckwith, and the Haunting of the New South* (Boston: Back Bay Publishers, 1995). The most complete biography of Medgar Evers is Michael V. Williams, *Medgar Evers: Mississippi Martyr* (Fayetteville, Arkansas: University of Arkansas Press, 2011).

man.” The day after the June 11 murder, Jimmy Ward, editor of the *Daily News*, called it a “dastardly act of inhuman behavior.” Yet, the *Jackson Daily News* went on to describe the murder of Evers in terms of how it reflected on Jackson’s public image concerning race relations rather than as a human tragedy. Reminiscent of how the *Holmes County Herald* described the Mack Parker lynching in 1959, the *Jackson Daily News* blamed Evers’s murder on “professional agitators” which was another term for civil rights activists. When Byron De La Beckwith was arrested two weeks after the murder, the *Clarion Ledger* announced the arrest with the June 24 headline, “Californian is Charged with the Murder of Evers.” Beckwith had been born in California, but he had lived in Mississippi since his early childhood. As far as the state’s leading newspapers were concerned, the murder of Evers had nothing to do with Jim Crow hatred.²⁵

Smith, on the other hand, knew Evers personally and was horrified over his slaying. They had developed a friendship after her problems with the Citizens’ Council began. In 1958, Evers wrote to NAACP director Roy Wilkins and asked for the organization to aid the financially strapped editor. Evers wrote that Smith had promised to “go all out, editorially, and otherwise, in our present struggle.” Evers argued that the NAACP could help keep Smith’s papers afloat through commercial printing jobs and the solicitation of advertisers. Smith published NAACP publications after this including the *Mississippi Free Press*. The publication of the *Free Press* was the vehicle that Smith’s enemies used to smear her in the state senate in January, 1962. Smith eulogized the slain civil rights leader in the same edition (June 13, 1963) that she wrote about the Alfred

²⁵ David R. Davies and Judy Smith, “Jimmy War and the *Jackson Daily News*,” in David R. Davies, ed., *The Press and Race: Mississippi Journalists Confront the Movement* (Jackson, Mississippi: University Press of Mississippi, 2001), 98.

Brown shooting in Lexington. Smith described Evers's murder as a "reprehensible crime against the laws of God and man." She recoiled at the deed and said it was "an ignorant product of our sick, hate-filled society." She asked her readers to search their hearts (and she included herself) to see what part they had played by deeds done or deeds left undone which helped create "a society which permits a man to be murdered because of his desire to be free and equal under the law." She warned, "God help us when the Negro starts hating in Mississippi" and declared that "Time is running out for us here in the Magnolia state." In a June 27, 1963 piece, she called Evers "more than a man-he was the living symbol of all the hopes and aspiration of Mississippi Negroes in their long struggle to throw off the shackles of discrimination existing in state law and custom." Smith's relationship with Evers and her words demonstrated that she had moved eons away from her contemporaries in Holmes County.²⁶

The editor's fortunes and those of black Mississippians mirrored each other in 1964. Smith reached the pinnacle of her profession while also suffering a terrible personal attack. African Americans in Mississippi and across the country saw the passage of the Civil Rights Act, but they still battled intimidation and violence culminating with the murder death of three civil rights workers in Philadelphia, Mississippi.

Smith's journalistic career reached its high mark with the bestowal of the Pulitzer Prize for Journalism in May 1964. She was the first woman to win the award for editorial writing. Hodding Carter III nominated Smith for the award in late 1963. The citation

²⁶ Medgar Evers to Roy Wilkins, 11 February 1958, quoted in Joseph Crespino, *In Search of a Another Country: Mississippi and the Conservative Counterrevolution* (Princeton, New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 2007), 33; *Lexington Advertiser*, 13, 27 June 1963.

cited the editor “For her steadfast adherence to her editorial duty in the face of great pressure and opposition.” Smith told the Memphis *Commercial Appeal* that she ran her newspapers “for the public good.” She said, “My fight had been to defend and protect the freedom of all Mississippians to say and do what they want to without taking dictation from the White Citizens’ Council, the Ku Klux Klan or any extremist organization.” Her white peers in Holmes County reacted much differently to the award. Wilburn Hooker, one of Smith’s main antagonists, told a reporter that he and others believed that Smith took her particular editorial stance in order to win prizes like the Pulitzer. He concluded, “Now that she has attained this goal, she ought to be happy.” K.B. Kenna, Mayor of Lexington, also dismissed the Smith and the award. He told a reporter, “Her philosophy and mine are so different, I just couldn’t be too proud of it.”²⁷

Others in Mississippi went further and expressed their displeasure toward the Pulitzer Prize winning editor. In August 1964, NBC news hired Smith to cover the Democratic National Convention in Atlantic City, New Jersey. While she was out of state, a vandal hurled an explosive into Smith’s paper in Jackson, the *Northside Reporter*. Undaunted, Smith vowed to continue. In a September 3 editorial entitled, “To the Person or Persons Responsible for the Bombing of the *Northside Reporter*,” Smith said the bomber was “doomed to failure” if they thought that their “cowardly deed” would “kill this paper.” She vowed that a “free and independent press” would continue. She

²⁷ Memphis *Commercial Appeal*, 5 May 1964.

defiantly concluded, “If, by chance, it was your purpose to frighten, harass, or intimidate, you’d better think again.”²⁸

Black Mississippians also saw incredible highs and lows in 1964. The efforts of millions of civil rights activists at the ground roots level, along the high profile efforts of leaders like Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr., pushed the United States government into action. The high point came with President Lyndon B. Johnson signing Civil Rights Act into law on July 2, 1964. The legislation outlawed discrimination in voter registration policies and it abolished segregation in public facilities. Under the act, the U.S. Attorney’s office had the power to use litigation to force the desegregation of public schools. Finally, the act allowed the government to withhold federal funds from states that practiced discrimination.²⁹

Once again, most Mississippi papers, including the *Holmes County Herald*, diverged prodigiously with the *Lexington Advertiser* concerning the Civil Rights Act. In her study on the state’s daily papers and their reaction, Susan Weill points out that the *Jackson Clarion Ledger* and the *Jackson Daily News* rejected the legislation. According to a June 16, 1964 *Clarion Ledger* editorial, the “civil rights bill would take away far more rights than it would protect.” Weill explained this editorial comment meant that the legislation would “threaten the state’s white power structure.” The *Herald* followed the same line of thought. In a July 9, 1964 editorial, the *Herald* called the law

²⁸ *Lexington Advertiser*, 3 September 1964, quoted in Arthur J. Kaul, “Hazel Brannon Smith and the *Lexington Advertiser*,” 257-258.

²⁹ *Civil Rights Act of 1964*, PL 88-352.

“unconstitutional” and urged its readers “to stand and fight back against bullying tactics of our power-hungry centralized federal government.”³⁰

Only a handful of newspapers in Mississippi gave a positive reaction to the Civil Rights Act. From her study, Weill concluded that the Carter’s Greenville *Delta Democrat-Times* stood as the only daily to editorially support the legislation. In another study, Weill looked at seventeen papers either owned or edited by women in Mississippi. Hazel Brannon Smith was only the only female journalist to support the Civil Rights Act. She wrote on June 18, 1964, “We have an idea things are not going to be as black [no pun intended] as they say.” She said that white southerners had been “half scared to death by propaganda against the Civil Rights Bill by these professionals who have not always stuck to the truth.”³¹

The major events of 1964 seem to come at many white Mississippians like a boxer with a terrific one-two punch. First, the government put forth the Civil Rights Act. Second, hundreds of white and black college students descended upon the state in an effort called the Mississippi Freedom Summer Project. The goal was to aid African Americans in voter registration efforts. Many of these college students came to Holmes County to aid the already organized activists at places like Mileston. Smith supported the effort of these young people. She characterized their work as “a missionary effort among our Negro citizens. . . an effort they have asked for and are entitled to.” She exhorted,

³⁰ Jackson *Clarion Ledger*, 16 June 1964, quoted in Susan Weill, “Mississippi’s Daily Press in Three Crises,” in David R. Davies, ed., *The Press and Race: Mississippi Journalists Confront the Movement* (Jackson, Mississippi: University Press of Mississippi, 2001), 38; *Holmes County Herald*, 9 July 1964.

³¹ Susan Weill, “Mississippi’s Daily Press in Three Crises,” 39; Susan Weill, “Hazel and the ‘Hacksaw: Freedom Summer Coverage by the Women of the Mississippi Press,” *Journalism Studies*, Volume 2, Number 4 (2000), 551; *Lexington Advertiser*, 18 June 1964.

“Surely we should not grudge ambition in our Negro friends – but instead encourage them.”³²

That Smith supported both the civil rights legislation and the Freedom Summer workers simply astounded not just people in Holmes County, but many journalists across the state. To many, Smith’s editorial policies were ill-advised and unconventional. Martha Lauderdale, editor of the *Brookhaven Leader-Advertiser*, commented on Smith in a June 2, 1964 editorial and said, “Hazel Brannon Smith is well known for her liberal thinking and must be sincere, but she is certainly misguided.” The *Holmes County Herald* went even further. Editor Paul Tardy made a veiled reference about Smith in a July 9, 1964 column. Though he did not mention Smith directly, the target of his attack was obvious to anyone in the county. In regards to Smith’s comments about Freedom Summer, Tardy wrote, “It makes me want to throw up when I read trash by so-called citizens of Mississippi who have turned traitor to our wonderful state and joined forces with these hate mongers.” Susan Weill points out that Smith’s peers considered her “misguided” and a “traitor” because she “challenged southern traditions . . . by advocating an agenda of equal justice for all people regardless of race.” Smith held a unique place as one of the few editors, male or female, “who openly advocated change in the state’s system of repressive white supremacy.”³³

The majority of whites in Mississippi wanted to keep the racial status quo intact, and thus resented the interloping of the Freedom Summer workers. In her study on female editors, Weill points out that these newspaper women used phrases like

³² Ibid., 2 July 1964.

³³ Martha Lauderdale quote found in Susan Weill, “Hazel and Hacksaw,” 545-546; *Holmes County Herald*, 9 July 1964; Susan Weill, “Hazel and Hacksaw,” 556.

“buttinksis,” “meddlers, misfits, nitwits, and mongrels,” “big mouthed Negroes and white trash,” and the all-encompassing “race agitators” to describe the college students who had come to work for civil rights. In Holmes County, the *Herald* followed suit. The paper referred to the student workers as “misguided invaders.”³⁴

Many in the state and Holmes County reacted toward the Freedom Summer workers with more than harsh words. Civil rights workers in the county came under gunfire, experienced car bombings, suffered arrests on trumped up charges. Smith reported on them all. In the August 13, 1964 *Advertiser*, she reported dynamite being thrown at the Mileston church. On October 29 1964, she reported that Hartman Turnbow and his Freedom Summer guests came under gunfire from nightriders. Whereas the *Herald* simply did not report events like this or placed blame on the civil rights activists themselves, Smith’s papers exposed the violence and intimidation being employed in Holmes County.³⁵

The height of the violence against Freedom Summer workers came with the murder of civil rights activists James Chaney, Michael Schwerner, and Andrew Goodman in the small central Mississippi town of Philadelphia, seventy miles southeast of Lexington. Chaney, an African American from Mississippi, along with the New York born Schwerner and the Ohio native Goodman, disappeared after being released from the Neshoba County Jail on June 21. The three young men had investigated the burning of a black church involved in voter registration and were arrested on traffic charges. After being released from jail that evening, they vanished. Their disappearance made national

³⁴ Ibid., 555; *Holmes County Herald*, 25 June 1964.

³⁵ *Lexington Advertiser*, 30 July, 9, 17 September, 29 October 1964.

headlines. Their bodies were found in an earthen levy in August. All three young men had been shot to death. Later the Neshoba County Sheriff's office and members of the local Ku Klux Klan were implicated in their murders.³⁶

During the six weeks of their being missing, the *Herald* offered an opinion on the missing young men. The *Herald's* perspective focused more on the idea that the young men had no business being in Mississippi rather than the violent crime perpetrated upon them. Allie Tardy, the wife of Editor Paul Tardy, wrote many opinion pieces, and in a June 25 editorial, she referred to the missing young men as "Mississippi haters." She said she sincerely hoped that nothing had happened to them, but then went on to characterize all Freedom Summer workers as "hoodlums drifting down from Yankeeland." A week later, Allie Tardy denounced the fact that Mississippi had "been unjustly tried, convicted, and condemned for a crime which may or may not have been committed." In other words, it was a terrible shame if something had happened to the young men, but if so, they brought it upon themselves, and Mississippi bore no blame. When federal law officials found the men's bodies in early August, Smith countered by saying that Mississippi *was* to blame. She wrote on August 6, "Mississippi is now blotted with another crime which we will never live down." In regards to race and civil rights, it was as if Smith and her peers in Mississippi were each looking at events from the opposite end of a telescope. The former had clear vision, the latter did not.³⁷

³⁶ Doug McAdam, *Freedom Summer* (New York: Oxford, 1988), 70; See also Bruce Watson, *Freedom Summer: The Savage Season of 1964 That Made Mississippi Burn and America A Democracy* (New York: Viking, 2010).

³⁷ *Holmes County Herald*, 25 June, 2 July 1964; *Lexington Advertiser*, 6 August 1964.

Despite the terrible deed, and the continued resistance of many white Mississippians, change was coming to the state. In late 1964, African Americans in Holmes County took advantage of the Civil Rights Act, aid from the Justice Department, and savvy civil rights lawyers to bring lawsuits to foster change. Smith headlined these events. In August 1964, Smith reported in the *Lexington Advertiser* that the U.S. Justice Department filed suit against Holmes County Circuit Clerk Henry McClellan. The lawsuit charged the official with voter discrimination against African Americans. According to county records, McClellan had registered only twenty out of a possible 8,700 African Americans in the county eligible to vote. At the same time he registered 4,000 out of 4,700 eligible white voters. The complaint charged that McClellan failed to give black applicants the same opportunity to register as white applicants. According to the grievance, McClellan forced black applicants to answer illogical questions like how many bubbles were in a bar of soap? Smith quoted McClellan's rejection of the charges. He said, "We treat the Negroes the same as whites here." Two weeks later Smith reported that Justice Department officials arrived in Lexington and began to examine voter rolls, poll books, and poll tax receipts dating back to 1962. A hearing in November was held, and sixty African Americans testified that McClellan used discriminatory tactics to prevent blacks from voting while allowing whites of similar backgrounds to vote. In September 1965, the federal court held in Jackson ordered McClellan to cease his discriminatory actions. African Americans still faced discrimination and violence in Holmes County, but the worm had definitely begun to turn.³⁸

³⁸ *Lexington Advertiser*, "Circuit Clerk Named in Voter Registration Suit," 6 August 1964, "Holmes Voter Suit to be Heard," 20 August 1964; "Justice Department Rests Voter Discrimination Case

Change was coming, but African Americans in Holmes County still faced many challenges as they entered 1965. African Americans across the county followed the Mileston example and began to organize. Many experienced similar treatment as Hartman Turnbow. A group from Durant and the surrounding area started meeting at Pilgrims Rest Church just outside town in order to plan voter registration strategy. In late August, white nightriders rode by and shot at the church during one of these meetings. By September, the Pilgrims Rest activists planned a counterattack. When a carload of nightriders came by again and shot at the church, some Pilgrims Rest members came out of the trees along side of the road and fired back. The nightriders did not come back. Walter Bruce, one of the activists from Pilgrims Rest, humorously noted the white response to the shooting. After the shooting, Bruce recounted that he heard many whites comment and say, “We not going to go back out there no more. Them Niggers got all kinds out there.”

Whereas most whites in the county did not want such events known, Smith wrote a brief article for the September 9, 1965 *Lexington Advertiser* and *Durant News* about the attack and the black response. Smith also reported with a front-page headline in November when activists Robert Cooper Howard and his wife Lilly May, came under gunfire because of their civil rights activity. They lived in Goodman seven miles south of Durant. Robert Cooper Howard drove off the attackers with return gunfire, but not before his wife was injured in the attack.³⁹

Against Circuit Clerk McClellan,” 12 November 1964, “Federal Court Orders Holmes Registrar not to Discriminate,” 30 September 1965.

³⁹ Walter Bruce Interview, 13, Tougaloo College, L. Zenobia Coleman Library, Archives. Online database: <http://www.usm.edu/crdp/html/transcripts.html>. Accessed 10 August 2012; *Lexington Advertiser*,

Despite all the violence, federal action and Smith's alerting the state to the goings on in Holmes County helped encourage local activists. Willie B. Davis, a school teacher and activist in the county later recalled the role that Smith played in the civil rights struggle in Holmes County. Davis said,

Had it not been for her paper, the abuse that was happening I think it would have been on a larger scale. It was somewhat curbed because of the fact that they knew that Hazel would print it—regardless, she would print it.⁴⁰

Many African American activists voiced the opinion that Smith's reporting gave them optimism because Smith exemplified that a white person in the county could change and was willing to join in an effort with African Americans. LaVerne Lindsey, another activist in the state, pointed out that Smith's journalistic dedication to equal justice had a major impact on the civil rights movement in Mississippi. Lindsey concluded, "I think she helped people to believe that we can achieve a semblance of justice." Aaron Henry, NAACP leader in Mississippi, echoed these sentiments in a 1965 interview with *Look* magazine. Asked about the role Smith played, Henry replied, "Hazel's been solid. Like rock and roll, she's here to stay. She has been pretty much the only voice that stood pretty much for total equality of mankind."⁴¹

In 1965, African Americans in Holmes County made sure that Smith understood their appreciation for the stance she took. In November, black leaders came together and hosted an Editor Appreciation Day rally in honor of Smith. Dr. Arenia C. Mallory, an old

9 September 1965; "Woman is Injured by Nightriders' Gunfire: Howard Home Near Goodman Hit Friday; Negro Returned Fire of Whites and Is later Arrested," *Lexington Advertiser*, 3 November 1965.

⁴⁰ Bernard L. Stein, "This Female Crusading Scalawag: Hazel Brannon Smith, Justice, and Mississippi": Profiles in Journalistic Courage - *Media Studies*, 2001, 65, Accessed 2 January 2013, <http://www.freedomforum.org/publications/msj/courage.summer2000/y09.html>.

⁴¹ *Ibid.*, 65; T. George Harris, "The 11-Year Siege of Mississippi's Lady Editor," *Look*, 16 November 1965, 126.

friend of Smith's, headed up the rally. Mallory served as president of Saints Jr. College, an African American School in Lexington. The assembly sought "to show in a small way our appreciation of Mrs. Smith and our gratitude for her always printing the truth." The organizers presented Smith with an ornamental handmade box containing \$2,852.22 and an orchid. One attendant penned and sang a song entitled "Through Hazel Eyes" in honor of Smith's column. Dr. Mallory gave an address and bluntly reminded her audience, "Can you imagine Lexington without the *Lexington Advertiser*? Or Holmes County without Hazel Brannon Smith? Why they would put your eyes out . . . and the white people, they would put their eyes out too!" Mallory urged the audience to keep supporting Smith's paper so that it would stay afloat. She summed up her remarks by saying that Smith was "not for you and not for me – she is for justice and has included me." In response, Smith gushed in a signed editorial that she considered herself the most blessed person, washed in warm oceans of love. She reminded her readers that she was fighting for the personal freedom of all, white and black. She offered that she hoped to find peace even with her enemies, and that all the citizens of Holmes County would work together to build "a great community, a great Holmes County, and a great Mississippi." Revealing some weariness from the decade long boycott, she exhorted, "Ten years is long enough."⁴²

African Americans outside Mississippi also issued praise for the stance that Smith took. In January 1964, the *Black World/Negro Digest* ran a piece praising Mississippi editors like Smith, Hodding Carter, and Ira Harkey. The author of the commentary called the editors "beacons in a sea of southern despair." The article noted that while the editors

⁴² *Lexington Advertiser*, 25 November 1965.

were “not necessarily what one would call ‘integrationists’,” they were to be praised for having,

the courage to report the civil rights story without a built in hominy-grits, chittlins, and chess pie bias. They have shown unwillingness to move with the mob in the middle of Red Neck country, in the face of economic sanctions (very heartless and effective ones too), the vilest of insults, and the loss of lifetime ‘friends.’⁴³

Henry Mitchell, a columnist for the Memphis *Commercial Appeal* chimed in concerning what role he thought Smith was playing. After seeing Smith give an interview on a television show from New York, Mitchell wrote that people like the editor gave him hope for lasting change in the racially divided South. Mitchell noted that Smith vowed to stay in the South where she was needed “rather in some other place where they could spend their day receiving compliments.”⁴⁴

In looking at Smith’s career in a 2001 article, Arthur J. Kaul rejected the view that held by others that Smith underwent a conversion type experience from avowed segregationist to civil rights advocate and became a “liberal martyr to the cause of press freedom.” According to Kaul, Smith’s career did not mirror “civil rights liberalism” because she never advocated integration. Not diminishing her brave stance, Kaul still asserted that Smith simply acquiesced to realities over time. In reality, putting a label on what Smith “was” is superfluous in one sense. What mattered is what she actually accomplished. She did tell her readers that she had never advocated integration, but then she turned around and argued that African Americans deserved social and political

⁴³ Robert Baram, “Did the Nation’s Press Sleep the Big Story,” *Black World/Negro Digest*, 13, no. 3, (January 1964), 71.

⁴⁴ Henry Mitchell, “Smith and Flowers on TV Typify New Hope for the South,” *Memphis Commercial Appeal*, 11 November 1965.

equality and access to economic opportunity. She denounced violence and intimidation toward black Americans and said they were striving for the basic values of freedom and self-determination. How was it possible to have these freedoms without some measure of societal integration? Smith understood that. Her white readers heard “integration” in these kinds of statements and tried to shut up her voice. African Americans understood that whatever Smith called herself, the reality remained she was a great ally in their cause.⁴⁵

African Americans appreciated the changes that Smith helped foster, but the same could not be said of most white Mississippians and more particularly, whites in Holmes County. A federal judge ordered Holmes County to develop a plan to integrate the public schools by the fall of 1965. The majority of white families in Holmes bolted to newly formed segregated academies in Durant, Lexington, and near the Delta hamlets of Cruger and Tchula. Faced with losing federal funds for segregated schools, Durant Mayor C.H. Blanton, Jr. announced that the public school would integrate starting with the first through the fourth grades. In September 1965, someone ignited a cross against his dry cleaning establishment, causing extensive damage. Even in this event, the monumental changes wrought by local activists, Smith’s editorial voice, and federal mandate can be seen. Membership in the Citizens’ Council was mandatory for any politician who wanted to stay in office in Mississippi in the late 1950s and early 1960s. Blanton had been active in the Durant Citizens’ Council, but by 1965 his allegiance to the best interest of Durant

⁴⁵ Arthur J. Kaul, “Hazel Brannon Smith and the *Lexington Advertiser*,” *The Press and Race*, 234. Mark Newman, “Hazel Brannon Smith and Holmes County Mississippi, 1936-1964: The Making of a Pulitzer Prize Winner,” *Journal of Mississippi History*, 61 argues that Smith transformed over time into a civil rights activist.

trumped whatever loyalty he had to the cause of white supremacy. Asked about the act of terrorism, Blanton admitted that he thought the cross burning came because of his stance on integration. By 1965, Smith was not the only prominent white person in Holmes County who felt squeezed because they had to address the societal changes coming to the state.⁴⁶

A victim herself of this kind of intimidation, Smith lambasted the perpetrators of the Blanton cross burning. She described the cross burners as “enemies of all the people of Durant.” She said those who carried out the deed posed “a direct threat to community peace, the physical safety and economic security of every family and business in Durant and the entire Holmes County area.” She called the participants in the cross burning “criminals” and said the warning came from “the bigoted small minded bully.” People of this ilk offered this justification for their actions. They said, “We don’t like what you say (or think, or do), you’d better get in line or else.” As she did when it happened to her back in 1960, Smith pleaded with her readers to stand up and stop this “submission to tyrants.” She wrote, “The time for decent people to make themselves heard, to stand up for what is right, is NOW. Tomorrow maybe too late.”⁴⁷

Some white Holmes County residents did take action in late 1965, but not the kind that Smith hoped for. For this cadre, the unthinkable was happening. The federal government had basically neutered the Citizens’ Council. Congress had passed the Voting Rights Act that outlawed literacy tests. In the fall of 1965, federal officials

⁴⁶Memphis *Commercial Appeal*, 16 September 1965; United Press International (no paper listed) “Durant Mayor Feels School Stand Responsible in Fire” 16 September 1965, clipping found in *C.H. Blanton Notebook, 1965-1970* in the author’s possession.

⁴⁷ *Lexington Advertiser*, 16 September 1965.

arrived in Holmes County to oversee voter registration for thousands of African Americans. The public schools of the county found themselves under a federal mandate to integrate, and really galling, Smith's papers still served as a thorn in the side of the white establishment.⁴⁸

A couple of weeks after the Blanton cross burning, citizens across the county awoke to find a flyer in their yard put there by a group that called themselves a "Local Civic Group." The message, entitled "The Nocturnal Messenger" issued a manifesto vowing to do whatever necessary to support white supremacy while also heaping scorn and threats against people like Mayor C.H. Blanton and Hazel Brannon Smith. The authors described themselves as a group of dedicated individuals who vowed to stop "the onslaught of communism in the disguise of 'so-called civil rights' to which we are being subjected to in this area." They promised "to regain the ground we have lost" by "whatever means we deem necessary to accomplish the task." These men considered their actions necessary since the "so-called leaders" were guilty of "appeasement and surrender."⁴⁹

The manifesto issued warnings to several different people in Holmes County. To African Americans in the county, the authors vowed that "we are not going to be overcome by anyone." Then the flyer took aim at Smith. The Civic Group said, "We are also tired of imported, Communist controlled newspaper women of questionable morals such as Hazel Brannon Smith of Lexington". Describing her as a leech, the handbill warned, "We want the Smith woman to know that her communist financed holiday in

⁴⁸ 1965 Voting Rights Act, *PL 89-110*; "Federal Examiners Are Assigned to Holmes," *Lexington Advertiser*, 11 November 1965.

⁴⁹ "Nocturnal Messenger" in *1965-1970 Notebook*, C.H. Blanton, Jr. Collection

Holmes County is just about over.” The same went for “Negro Agitators” and white civil rights workers described as “white scum.” Finally, the leaflet warned leaders like Mayor C.H. Blanton, Jr. against going against the prevailing white sentiment; namely, maintaining white supremacy. The authors called Blanton a “petty politician” and said he could take his “advice” concerning school integration “and take a journey to hell with it.”⁵⁰

Undaunted, Smith reprinted large sections of the “Nocturnal Messenger” in a report and denounced it in her personal column. She condemned the authors as “cowards” and warned her readers that if these kinds of actions continued, then Holmes County citizens could expect a permanent federal presence. Smith pointed out that the handbill was an out-flowing of the organized oppression that had ruled the county for over a decade. She wrote, “The prejudiced, bigoted, selfish, self-serving people of ill will have long been organized in Holmes County.” She said these “loud mouths” had “created a climate of public opinion in which a plain, ordinary, private citizen is afraid to speak his mind if he does not agree with the ‘powers that be.’” Smith actually apologized to her readers that she “could not alone contain the tide of hate, frustration and resentment these ignorant men feel – but it has spilled over and now threatens to engulf us all.” She once again called on her readers to “have the will and the courage to do something about it NOW.” One may describe her as being guilty of hubris, but Smith really believed it was her job as a local newspaper owner to protect and serve her community. This meant promoting things that she felt helped the community and harshly criticizing people or events that threatened the community’s best interests. Standing

⁵⁰ Ibid., *1965-1970 Notebook*, C. H. Blanton, Jr. Collection.

against the tide of public opinion, taking a lot of personal and financial attacks, Smith felt she had to call out her community and point it in a better direction.⁵¹

In November, 1965, Smith gave an interview and revealed the financial burden her struggle had incurred as well as giving insight into why she took the stance that made her so unpopular. Smith told reporter Phyllis Battelle that the boycott against her papers had put her \$150,000 in debt. Always having a good sense of humor, Smith quipped, “That’s a respectable amount to be in debt, I think. But, I’m not about to go under.” A deeply committed Christian, Smith told the reporter about why she had stuck it out so long. She said, “I’ve been living on faith for eleven years, and God willin [sic] I can keep on that way till the decent people of Mississippi stop being immobilized with fear.” Though there appeared no let up of white resistance, Smith believed it would come. Despite a decade long boycott, she said she went “on the assumption that all these people are basically decent, and when they stop being scared, they’ll show it.” Asked about bitterness, she again used humor and said, “It’s not my nature to be bitter. I’m unbearable enough as it is.”⁵²

While talking about the situation for young people in Holmes County, Smith revealed some insight into her own evolution. She told Battelle,

“The one thing I resent is that the adults of the South are installing in our young people a wholly false sense of values. As long as the kids are pushed into thinking white supremacy and segregation can continue to exist, in spite of the law, those kids are completely incapable of going out and making their own way in the world. They’ll never adjust to reality.”⁵³

⁵¹ *Lexington Advertiser*, 7 October 1965.

⁵² Phyllis Battelle “A Woman Stands Up for the Ideals She Believes In,” Patterson, *New Jersey Call*, 10 November 1965; the clipping is in the Mississippi Sovereignty Commission Records, (SCR ID #) 10-36-0-22-1-1-1.

⁵³ *Ibid.*, Patterson, *New Jersey Call*, 10 November 1965.

This “reality” that Smith spoke about gives us a key insight into her journey. She grew into adulthood firmly affirming the values of Jim Crow society. As a journalist in the 1940s and early 1950s, she did not see the contradiction between her basic beliefs in freedom of speech and law and order and the inequality of Jim Crow segregation. Yet, she affirmed her right to speak about and evaluate the issues and events that sought to dismantle Jim Crow. As a journalist, she believed she had the freedom to condemn the violence and intimidation used to maintain white supremacy. For these convictions, she came under virulent attack. This led her to reevaluate and come to a new reality where she promoted equal justice and opportunity for all. Smith understood the direction the country was heading, even if her readers refused to see. She knew that activists, with the aid of the federal government, were forcing states like Mississippi to adapt to a more democratic atmosphere. It was foolish to think otherwise.

Foolish or not, that did not stop those radically committed to white supremacy from employing unspeakable violence in January 1966. On January 10, members of the Ku Klux Klan firebombed the home of Vernon L. Dahmer, an African American, in the south Mississippi town of Hattiesburg. A successful entrepreneur, Dahmer owned a store, a saw mill, and a three hundred acre farm. He was also president of the Forrest County NAACP and had been active in voter registration. With his house on fire, Dahmer ushered his family out of the building, but he stayed inside and fought a gun battle with the Klansmen. He died the next day from the burns and lung damage he sustained. Fourteen men were indicted for his murder, and five eventually served time.

Sam Bowers, the Imperial Wizard of the White Knights of the Ku Klux Klan, masterminded the attack but would not be convicted until his fifth trial in 1998.⁵⁴

The murder shocked the nation and demonstrated that a violent element in Mississippi was still unwilling to recognize African American equality. The crime shocked, saddened, and sickened Smith. In a signed editorial, “Murder of Vernon Dahmer,” Smith asked, “How much longer must Mississippi suffer from the crimes of those who have no respect for themselves, their state, or human life?” She denounced Dahmer’s killer and said they had “committed a crime that only God can forgive.” She said they murderers were “enemies of Mississippi” because all the white people of the state would “be blamed for their misdeeds.” She concluded that the only way to “assuage that guilt” was to guarantee, “the criminals are apprehended and receive full punishment.” Smith went on to offer her sympathy to the Dahmer family and prophesied that whites and other African Americans were going to feel this kind of pain “if the present atmosphere is not changed. The resulting conditions will be nothing less than anarchy.” Smith saw the entire state on the verge of warfare. She concluded, “God help us to move before it is everlastingly too late.”⁵⁵

The NAACP magazine, the *Crisis*, ran a long article detailing Dahmer’s influence and the heinousness of the crime committed against him. Interestingly, the article quoted from Smith’s January 13, 1966 editorial about Dahmer. Also, the author of the piece

⁵⁴ Vernon Dahmer Biographical Sketch, Vernon F. Dahmer Collection, McCain Library and Archives, University of Southern Mississippi, Hattiesburg, Mississippi, Accessed 25 March 2013, <http://www.lib.usm.edu/legacy/archives/m250.htm>.

⁵⁵ *Lexington Advertiser*, 13 January 1966.

referred to Smith as “the liberal.” By January 1966, that described Smith in the context of Mississippi and demonstrated how far away she had moved from many in her state.⁵⁶

With so many pressures being placed on Mississippi to change, even the editor came under physical threat. Since 1954, black activists in Mississippi had seen all manner of violence, and so had white male activists who came from out of state to help, but Smith had never been harmed physically. It’s possible that the southern male honor code of protecting white women applied even to the female scalawag as Wilburn Hooker called her in 1962. Bill Minor, Smith’s friend and journalistic colleague, thought so. In an interview about Smith’s career Minor stated plainly that Smith was not harmed because she was a woman. Minor said, “I’m sure that if she had been a man, that they would have lynched her.” After Vernon Dahmer’s murder, Smith herself became a target. The Federal Bureau of Investigation (FBI) informed her back in the fall of 1964 that the Ku Klux Klan had put her on their hit list. In January 1966, the House Committee on Un-American Activities warned Smith that members of the Jackson Ku Klux Klan had sought permission from higher ups to “eliminate” her. Smith admitted in her column that she had slept with a loaded gun next to her bed since October of 1964. She lamented the condition her beloved state was in. The editor commented that she had spent her entire adult life in Mississippi and thought of it as a wonderful place with “a special kind of people,” and that she wanted to live nowhere else. At the same time, Mississippi was a terrifying place. She wrote,

So it breaks my heart to be faced with the indisputable fact that there are sadistic, morally depraved Mississippians who kill, torture and maim other Mississippians, wicked Mississippians who bomb homes and churches,

⁵⁶ Gloster B. Current, “Death in Mississippi,” *Crisis*, (February 1966), 108.

sick Mississippians who have added an unbearable burden of fear and terror to an already overburdened state.⁵⁷

A real threat actually came the next month. On a Thursday night in February, the phone rang in the Smith home at 9:55 p.m. Walter Smith answered it, and the caller told him, “There’s going to be some excitement out there at 10:15.” The caller then hung up. The Smiths called city and county law officials as well as the FBI. They turned off the lights and waited with loaded weapons in the dark for over ninety minutes. Law officers waited outside the Smith home, but no miscreant appeared. Frightened, but too hardened to back down by this point, Smith reported the phone call in her column. She vowed, “There would have been some excitement ‘out there’ at Hazelwood had the visit materialized.” Smith warned, “The first one that put his foot on my home grounds would have been shot dead. The same goes for any future invaders - stay away from my home if you don’t want to get killed. And you may consider this a public notice and fair warning.”⁵⁸

No one ever attacked her home, but someone did try to burn the *Lexington Advertiser* down in the summer of 1967. Ruled to be arson, the fire inflicted \$10,000 worth of damage. Smith wrote about the fire and said she could not believe that someone from inside the county set it, and until evidence proved otherwise, she was sticking to that premise.⁵⁹

⁵⁷ Bill Minor quote in Fred Grimm, “Crusader Hazel Smith, Champion for Civil Rights, Fights Final Battle Alone and Forgotten,” *Chicago Tribune*, 27 March 1986; *Lexington Advertiser*, 20 January 1966.

⁵⁸ *Ibid.*, 17 February 1966.

⁵⁹ *Ibid.*, 13 July 1967.

Despite the personal setback, 1967 marked a major turning point for African Americans in Mississippi and for Hazel Brannon Smith. Triumph had come through great struggle. In an interview with the *Miami Herald*, Smith declared, “In Mississippi, we’re in the middle of everything, and sometimes it’s happening to me.” That being said, she refused to back down from those who charged her with having an agenda in regards to race. She restated her philosophy that had been the same since she arrived in Mississippi a fresh-faced twenty-two year old in 1936. She said, “A newspaper has to serve all the people. I print the news.” Despite the financial burden, the ostracism, the mind numbing violence and intransigence, Smith saw a monumental shift in Holmes County, Mississippi; a shift she helped facilitate. What was this major change? It was the fact black Holmes Countians were going to the polls. In a county that consisted of a population where 71% of the inhabitants were African American, the franchise stood as the game changer. Smith told the *Miami Herald* reporter, “This is election year in Mississippi.” Smith noted that in 1963 no African Americans were allowed to vote. The tables had turned. She said, “Holmes this year already has 6,000 registered Negro voters. The back is broken. The resistance is down. The Negro will vote.” The Negro did vote. In November of 1967, black educator Robert Clark won the county election and became the first African American to serve in the Mississippi state legislature since the 1890s.⁶⁰

Between 1954 and 1967, Hazel Brannon Smith moved far a field from her white peers in Mississippi in general, and more specifically, Holmes County. Pressure from staunch defenders of Jim Crow forced her to reevaluate her cherished beliefs. She grew

⁶⁰ Lucille Preuss, “Seeing Ole Miss with Hazel Eyes,” *Miami Herald*, 14 May 1967, clipping in Mississippi Sovereignty Commission Records (SCR id #), 10-36-0-27-1-1-1

outraged over the violence and intimidation aimed at African Americans who simply wanted legal equality and a better life. She came to see groups like the Citizens' Council as antithetical to the freedoms that served as the foundation of American society. Never intending to, she became an ally of the civil rights movement because she saw her own struggle for civil liberties as a part of this greater effort. The election of Robert Clark marked a new era for Mississippi and for her. The rest of her career would be geared toward adapting to this new landscape.

CHAPTER VIII

"THE PRICE OF SPEAKING THE TRUTH HAS BEEN HIGH": SURVIVING IN THE POST CIVIL RIGHTS ERA

“You don’t just do that kind of thing. How many times have I heard that? But I really didn’t do things to scandalize people. I didn’t go into things about trying to raise hell or shock people. Many times I almost cried about some of the things I had to write. But when something’s happening that’s not good for the community, you’ve got to write about it.”

Hazel Brannon Smith

Jackson Clarion Ledger/Daily News January 5, 1986

As Hazel Brannon Smith entered the 1970s, she found a transformed world. The civil rights movement produced fundamental political and social shifts. African Americans in Holmes County and across the South could vote. Robert Clark, an African American educator from Holmes County, won a state congressional seat in 1967. He was the first black legislator to serve in the Mississippi House since the 1890s. Following his lead, African Americans across Holmes County began to win elections and fill, at one time or another, every substantial position from city alderman, to sheriff, to tax collector by the early 1980s.¹

¹ Neil McMillan, *Dark Journey: Black Mississippians in the Age of Jim Crow* (Urbana, Illinois: University of Illinois Press, 1990), 60, notes that three African Americans were elected to the Mississippi House of Representatives in 1892, and the last black legislator, before Clark, took office in 1898; Sylvia Reedy Gist, *Educating a Rural Southern Community: A History of Schooling for Blacks in Holmes County, Mississippi, 1870 to 1993* (Pelham, Alabama: Productivity Unlimited Publishers, 1995), 211, points out that African American held the majority of the county’s eighteen elected positions by 1982.

At the same time, most whites in the county, and the state for that matter, persevered in their fight against black equality. With the integration of public schools mandated by the courts, a large number of whites in the towns of Lexington and Durant, as well as the Delta hamlets of Cruger and Tchula bolted the public schools and formed three segregated academies. African Americans rejected these and other attempts to undermine their struggle for equality and better treatment. Many African Americans in towns like Lexington still decried job discrimination, less than adequate public service to black neighborhoods, and police intimidation. As she had done throughout her career, Hazel Brannon Smith weighed in on these issues and attempted, as she saw it, to speak for the county's health and well-being.²

An article in the December 21, 1978 edition of the *Lexington Advertiser* clearly demonstrated this dichotomy of simultaneous change and stasis. On the front page, Smith published a piece about the University of Mississippi (Ole Miss) football team signing Buford McGee to a letter of intent. McGee was an African American from Durant High School. Leading the team as quarterback, McGee had helped lead the Durant Tigers to three straight undefeated seasons. The article included a photo of a smiling McGee and the Ole Miss officials standing at a podium. A Confederate flag hung on the wall behind them. Less than sixteen years before, two men died when

² East Holmes Academy was formed in Durant in 1965, and the later moved ten miles north to the small town of West. Cruger-Tchula Academy was formed in the Delta part of the county in 1965. Whites in Lexington formed Central Holmes Academy in 1967; See Susan Lorenzi Sojourner and Cheryl Reitman, *Thunder of Freedom: Black Leadership and the Transformation of 1960s Mississippi* (Lexington, Kentucky: University of Kentucky Press, 2013), 108; Joseph Crespino, *In Search of Another Country: Mississippi and the Conservative Counterrevolution* (Princeton, New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 2007), 241-242; Richard Rubin, *A Confederacy of Silence: A True Tale of the New Old South* (New York: Astria Books, 2002), 96; Jason Sokol, *There Goes My Everything: White Southerners in the Age of Civil Rights* (New York: Vintage/Alfred A. Knopf, 2007), 169.

hundreds of white students and others rioted and attacked U.S. Marshals on Ole Miss's campus to prevent the integration of James Meredith. By 1978, black athletes from counties like Holmes were matriculating to Ole Miss, but the vestiges of a racist past still remained.³

The concurrent reality of change and status quo undermines the popular conception of the civil rights movement. For many, the accepted narrative is that civil rights activists basically reached most of their goals by the end of the 1960s. Led by icons like Martin Luther King, Jr., the civil rights movement managed to sway federal officials who in turn enacted sweeping changes through the Civil Rights Act of 1964 and the Voting Rights Act of 1965. By late 1960s, as the storyline goes, African Americans successfully turned the tide for integration and civil justice. In a number of works over the last two decades, historians have shown the civil rights movement was not *a fait accompli* by the end of the 1960s, far from it. Instead, in many places like Holmes County, African Americans got their foot in the door through determination and civil rights legislation, but the battle for political and social equality had just begun and continued through the 1970s into the 1980s.⁴

³ *Lexington Advertiser*, 21 December 1978; Buford McGee played four years at the University of Mississippi and played 9 years (1984-1992) in the National Football League with the San Diego Chargers, Los Angeles Rams, and the Green Bay Packers

⁴ For the continuing struggle in Mississippi, see Charles Payne, *I've Got the Light of Freedom: The Organizing Tradition and the Mississippi Freedom Struggle* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1995); John Dittmer, *Local People: The Struggle for Civil Rights in Mississippi* (Urbana, Illinois: University of Illinois Press, 1994); Melissa Fay Greene, *Praying for Sheetrock* (New York: Fawcett, 1991), Greene chronicles the struggles of African Americans in coastal McIntosh County in Georgia as they sought to overcome official corruption and still entrenched components of Jim Crow racism well into the 1970s. She demonstrates the complexity of both the black and white experience and how the coming of the civil rights movement did not necessarily translate into a linear narrative of the triumph of justice.; Jacquelyn Dowd Hall, "The Long Civil Rights Movement and Political Uses of the Past" *Journal of American History* 91 (2005), 1233-1263; See Joseph Crespino's, *In Search of Another Country*:

Hazel Brannon Smith sought to steer her newspapers through these turbulent waters as well. During the last fifteen years of her career, she faced three main challenges. First, she had to cope with the economic aftermath of her decade and a half long struggle with the white leadership of Holmes County. As she came into the 1970s, she no longer faced an advertising boycott from the majority of the county's white merchants, but the damage had been done. Throughout the rest of her career, she struggled to keep her newspapers afloat in the face of growing debt and decreased readership.

Smith's second conflict took on a more personal nature. Between the mid-1950s and the late 1960s, she endured a cross burning in front of her home, a bombing of one paper plant, and arson at another. The Ku Klux Klan threatened to kill her. She endured character assassination by many of her journalistic peers and state legislators. Most painful for her was the ostracism inflicted by her former friends. While the boycotts and threats stopped, the community ire against her never quite receded. This took a physical and psychological toll on Smith. At various times during the 1970s and 1980s, she revealed to peers and readers alike what the fight for civil liberties and civil rights had cost her.

The third challenge that Smith faced revolved around her attempt to adapt to the new dynamic of black political involvement in Holmes County. As Smith weighed in on the issues facing the county, she met a growing number of black leaders who disregarded or flat out rejected her views. Nationally and regionally, Smith received attention and

Mississippi and the Conservative Counterrevolution for the response of Mississippi's white leadership to the civil rights and post-civil rights era.

praise for her fight for social justice in the 1950s and 1960s, including a Pulitzer Prize in 1964. However, the economic and personal wounds incurred in the 1960s did not heal. They remained raw and open. The struggles of the 1970s and the early 1980s only served to deepen the injuries to her fortunes, her reputation, and her psyche.⁵

The fact that Smith managed to maintain her livelihood, not to mention her sanity, into the 1970s demonstrated that she held a unique place as a social commentator in Mississippi. She stood as one of a handful of Mississippi journalists, and the only woman editor, who consistently challenged white intransigence and violence in the 1960s. Yet by the early 1970s, the majority of her like-minded colleagues had either died or moved away from Mississippi. Hodding Carter, Jr., the fiery editor of the Greenville *Delta-Democrat Times*, and one of Smith's staunchest allies, died of a heart attack in 1972. Carter had supported Smith in his columns and had helped raise money to keep her newspapers afloat in the late 1950s and early 1960s. P.D. East, a journalist who relished lampooning the antics of groups like the Citizens' Council, feared for his life and left Mississippi in the 1962 and died in 1971 from intestinal complications. Ira Harkey, editor and owner of the Pascagoula *Chronicle-Star*, had pushed for equal justice and civil rights for black Mississippians long before Smith. Harkey won the 1963 Pulitzer Prize

⁵ Two biographies of Smith have been published: John Whalen, *Maverick Under the Magnolias: The Hazel Brannon Smith Story* (USA: Xlibris Press, 2000), and Jan Whitt, *Burning Crosses and Activist Journalism: Hazel Brannon Smith and the Civil Rights Movement* (Lanham, Maryland: University Press of America, 2010); Articles on Smith include Mark Newman, "Hazel Brannon Smith and Holmes County, Mississippi, 1936-1964: The Making of a Pulitzer Prize Winner" *The Journal of Mississippi History* 54 (1) (February 1992); Arthur J. Kaul, Arthur Kaul, "Hazel Brannon Smith and the Lexington Advertiser," in David R. Davies, ed., *The Press and Race: Mississippi Journalists Confront the Movement* (Jackson, Mississippi: University Press of Mississippi, 2001); Susan Weill, "Hazel and 'Hacksaw': Freedom Summer Coverage By the Women of the Mississippi Press" *Journalism Studies*, 2, no. 4 ; Bernard Stein, "This Female Crusading Scalawag: Hazel Brannon Smith, Justice, and Mississippi" *Media Studies Journal*, 14, no. 2 (Spring/Summer 2000); Matthew Bosisio, "Hazel Brannon Smith: Pursuing Truth at Her Peril" *American Journalism* 18, no. 4 (2002);

for his editorials condemning Mississippi's violent reaction to James Meredith integrating Ole Miss in 1962. Like Smith and the rest, he encountered vilification by his peers as well as gunshots through the front window of his office. He sold his paper for a considerable profit and left Mississippi in 1963. In a male dominated profession, Smith thrived. Taking a stance for social justice in a society that demanded conformity or backlash, she took the economic, social, and personal blows, and managed to hang on.⁶

Though battered and bruised from the fifteen-year struggle, Smith approached the 1970s with a measure of optimism due to the gains African Americans had made in the late 1960s. Whites in power used the *Holmes County Herald* to malign both black activists as well as Smith herself, while her papers gave blacks a voice. These protesters did not forget her help. Though they had gained the vote in 1965, many black leaders still denounced continued discrimination in areas like jobs. In 1967, African Americans employed a selective buying campaign against white merchants in Lexington who practiced hiring discrimination and verbally mistreated black customers. The protesters also called for the white merchants to end their advertising boycott against Smith's papers. The activists denounced the county board of supervisor's continued refusal to publish its legal announcements in Smith's papers. This practice had been employed since the founding of the *Holmes County Herald* in late 1958. For African Americans, the selective buying campaign made the statement that turnabout was fair play. It eventually worked. White merchants tried to hang on but buckled under the prolonged

⁶ Ann Waldron, *Hodding Carter: The Reconstruction of a Racist* (Chapel Hill, NC: Algonquin Books, 1993); Gary Huey, *Rebel with a Cause: P.D. East, Southern Liberalism and the Civil Rights Movement, 1953-1971* (Wilmington, Delaware: Scholarly Resources, 1985); Ira Harkey, Jr., *The Smell of Burning Crosses: An Autobiography of a Mississippi Newspaperman* (Jacksonville, Illinois: Harris-Wolfe and Col, 1967), 19.

drop off of black business. In September of 1969, the Lexington Chamber of Commerce issued a statement that formally opposed police brutality against any citizen and promoted equal justice for all citizens regardless of color. By December 1969, black activists announced that they had come to terms with the Lexington Chamber of Commerce and were ending the selective buying campaign. The Chamber issued a statement promising to “work for lasting peace among our people of the Lexington community.” The merchants admitted that they wanted to end all boycotts, “including the boycott of the *Lexington Advertiser*.” This was actually the first time that a formal boycott against Smith had been admitted publicly. Slowly Smith began to receive some white business advertisements that had been denied her paper for over a decade and a half. In February 1970, the Greenville *Delta Democrat Times* reported that the Holmes County Board of Supervisors gave Smith the two-year contract to publish all the county’s legal announcements. The editorial surmised that it was about time for change in places like Holmes. It concluded, “The important point is that the tide is no longer battering against one lone woman trying to tell the truth as she sees it.”⁷

Smith voiced her optimism in a personal column in December 1971. In the piece, she commented on Durant holding an integrated Christmas parade. The festivities included floats by various black and white organizations. Smith reported, “The Durant parade, the first in many years, was a joyful, happy event.” She saw the parade as a sign for what was possible in the county. She wrote,

⁷ *Lexington Advertiser*, 21, 28 September 1967, 25 December 1969; John Whalen, *Maverick Under the Magnolias: The Hazel Brannon Smith Story* (USA: Xlibris Press, 2000), 241; Greenville *Delta Democrat-Times*, 9 February 1970.

The spirit of goodwill and enthusiastic cooperation which prevailed in the inception and production of this holiday event is something that should be bottled, but not placed on a shelf. It should be used the year round to develop in Durant, and the entire county, those things that we as Holmes Countians know we need and can use to build a better, more progressive county in which to work and live.⁸

The parade pleased her. Her struggle for civil liberties and her alliance with the African American struggle for civil rights appeared to be bearing fruit. She concluded the column with a colloquial admission, “We are one happy girl.”⁹

Smith’s optimism, however, belied her financial realities. Though the boycott was over, the damage had been profound. It carved out a deep pit of debt that she would never climb out of. In 1973, Smith gave an interview to the *Washington Post* while in the nation’s capital to attend the premier of a film, *An Independent Voice*. The movie looked at the role of the weekly press. In the interview, Smith admitted that she had borrowed over \$300,000 to keep her newspaper operations going. She tried to sound chipper, remarking that almost all of her advertisers had returned and that her circulation had never decreased. Smith quipped, “Oh, a handful of people canceled their subscriptions during the Civil Rights years, but they sent their cooks down to buy the paper issue by issue.”¹⁰

Despite the optimism and perseverance, Smith’s papers continued to accrue debt. One reason was that Holmes County was the second poorest in the state, and its economic status did not improve in the 1970s. Also, Smith once held sway journalistically over the county by owning the only major papers, the *Lexington Advertiser* and the *Durant News*.

⁸ *Lexington Advertiser*, 16 December 1971.

⁹ *Ibid.*, 16 December 1971.

¹⁰ Henry Mitchell, “Woes and Glory,” *Washington Post*, 4 May 1973, B4.

Even without a formal boycott, she still faced competition from the *Holmes County Herald*. In 1966, a group started the *Durant Plaindealer* to take advantage of the boycott and took a significant slice of Smith's business. Lexington also had an AM radio station, WXTN. There was only so much advertising revenue to be found in Holmes County, and thus Smith's share had significantly diminished.¹¹

Smith's dogged determination kept her going, and she tried to put a positive spin on her predicament. She assured Henry Mitchell at the *Washington Post* that the turmoil of the 1960s was over. She crowed, "Now I'm the most popular girl in town, would you believe it? People come right up and say, 'You were right – we're sorry.'" However, sorrow and regret did not stem the flow of red ink flooding her business. She summarized her affairs by saying, "and last year, let's see, I don't think the *Advertiser* lost but \$17,000 or \$18,000."¹²

How did she stay in business? She mortgaged her papers, her home, and a farm she and her husband owned. By the late 1950s, when the boycott against her went full throttle, she was forced to drastically scale back her extravagant lifestyle. She no longer wore the latest fashions and drove a Rambler instead of a Cadillac. Newspaper allies like Hodding Carter, Jr., and others had raised money for Smith by putting advertisements in her papers. African Americans in Holmes County did their part in raising money to keep Smith in business. Smith also went on the lecture circuit and gave speeches ranging from \$300 to \$1000 an appearance. Yet all of this was not enough. Smith admitted that she was not funding the paper alone and had a secret benefactor. She said,

¹¹ John Whalen, *Maverick Under the Magnolias*, 242-243.

¹² Henry Mitchell, *Washington Post*, 4 May 1973, B4.

Even the money problem—a good man and a great man with Mississippi connections lent me money. When it got to \$100,000, I said no more. I couldn't pay back any more, even if I sold everything. He said no, it's just money and I've got plenty of it. You and Mr. Smith are investing your lives, which is more than money. So it was a loan we can pay back or not.¹³

Smith reflected on her situation, “God has been with me. If He hadn't, I would be insane or dead.” Smith's biographer, John Whalen, asked many of her surviving peers if they knew who the mystery benefactor was. None of them knew. Regardless, Smith saw her fortunes only worsen as the 1970s progressed.¹⁴

The question must also be asked, why did she stay in business? From the very beginning of her career, she had impressed her peers with her drive, her intelligence, her determination, her vivacious personality, and her commitment to the highest of journalistic principles. She could have sold her papers during the crises of the late 1950s and 1960s and left with a lot of money for greener and easier pastures. Instead, she stayed the course. Why? Part of it was professional pride and stubbornness. As a journalist, she had a job to do, that of reporting the news as factually and objectively as possible. Like the Progressive Muckrakers of the early 1900s, she reported dishonesty, brutality, and lawlessness when discovered, and she determined to not let anyone run her out of the county. In a 1956 letter to Hodding Carter, Jr., Smith admitted, “Sometimes I feel like just going on and selling out” to those who ran things in Holmes County. Deep

¹³ Ibid., *Washington Post*, 4 May 1973, B4.

¹⁴ Ibid., *Washington Post*, 4 May 1973, B4; John Whalen, *Maverick Under the Magnolias*, 255; *Newsweek*, 13 December 1965. (no page #), Hazel Brannon Smith Vertical File, Durant, Ms. Public Library; Smith sold her Jackson paper, the *Northside Reporter*, in 1973 to her friend Bill Minor for \$5000. She closed down her Flora, Mississippi paper, the *Banner County Outlook*, in 1979. Flora is in Madison County just north of Jackson and 40 miles south of Holmes. She acquired both in the mid 1950s as an insurance plan to have a place to go if she had to leave Holmes County. Neither had been profitable. See John Whalen, *Maverick Under the Magnolias*, 101, 105-106, 255-256, 269.

down, this notion galled her. She told Carter, “But if I did, I feel that I would be compromising everything I have ever stood for and believed in and I can’t do it.” This conviction sustained her through the turbulent fifties and sixties. She refused to be cowed and beaten. Mostly, she remained out a sense of duty and a desire to make a difference. Clarence Cason, her mentor at the University of Alabama in the 1930s, pleaded with his journalism students to remain in their home areas and not “leave the South in the lurch.” Smith took this mantra to heart and sought to live it out. She weathered the storms and continued into the 1970s even though the tide of debt continued to rise.¹⁵

Smith’s commitment to her conscience and journalistic principles in the face of massive resistance not only hurt her financially; it also incurred a heavy emotional and psychological toll. Smith laughed it off at times, but the underlying pain of rejection came out in interviews. In 1965, Smith told columnist Phyllis Battelle to come down South and see the editor. When Battelle admitted being afraid, Smith laughed, and said, “Honey, it isn’t all that bad. If you walked down the streets of Lexington with me, everyone would act real friendly. You’d think I was on the best terms with everybody. You wouldn’t see the knife in the back.”¹⁶

By the 1970s, Smith no longer tried to hide her pain, at least not from her colleagues. Garrett Ray, a contemporary of Smith and fellow member of the

¹⁵ Hazel Brannon Smith to Hodding Carter, Jr., September 17, 1956, quoted in Mark Newman, “Hazel Brannon Smith and Holmes County, Mississippi, 1936-1964, 72; Arthur Kaul, “Hazel Brannon Smith and the Lexington Advertiser,” 234, argues that the Muckraker journalists of the Progressive Era deeply influenced Smith’s style of journalism; Smith referred to Clarence Cason’s example and teaching in George Harris, “The 11-Year Siege of Mississippi’s Lady Editor,” *Look*, 16 November 1965, 122.

¹⁶ Phyllis Battelle, “A Woman Stands Up for the Ideals She Believes In,” *Patterson, New Jersey Call*, 10 November 1965. Article found in Mississippi Sovereignty Commission Records, SCR ID # 10-36-0-22-1-1-1.

International Society of Weekly Newspaper Editors (ISWNE), wrote about this cost. He said, “The cliché is true: Courage demands a price. For Hazel Brannon Smith, the price of speaking the truth has been high - perhaps unbearably high.” Ray noted, “Hazel Smith has paid a price because she spoke out for justice. The most painful price of all may be alienation from the people and places she has loved the most.” In his article on Smith, Ray referred to a 1975 ISWNE meeting where Smith shared her experiences with her fellow editors. She told them, “In these twenty one years, we have run up an indebtedness of well over \$400,000.” Smith admitted, “I have my own name on over \$350,000 worth of paper. I won’t live long enough to pay it all back.” Smith confessed that having children would have precluded the battle she waged. She said,

The Lord knew what he was doing. If I’d had children I couldn’t have done this. I could take it for myself, and Smitty could take it too. But if we’d had children, they would have had to be our first consideration, and we simply would have sold out and left, and that would be the end of that - and we’d be a lot better off financially!”¹⁷

One wonders if Smith regretted not having the opportunity to travel down that path.

This seems to be borne out by what Smith also revealed at the 1975 meeting. She acknowledged what life was like for her in Holmes County. Once the popular, dashing, and rich editor, by the late 1950s, she said felt like a leper. She told her ISWNE colleagues that being shunned by friends hurt much more than the financial burden and fear generated by the Citizens’ Council. Rick Friedman, a former ISWNE president and

¹⁷ Garrett Ray, “Hazel Brannon Smith,” *Grassroots (Journal of the International Society of Weekly Newspaper Editors)*, Winter 1987, Accessed 10 February 2013, http://www.iswne.org/foundation/scholarships/hazel_brannon_smith/hazel-brannon-smith-scholarship/article_c13a1142-529e-11e1-bca7-0019bb2963f4.html.

friend of Smith, was at the 1975 meeting and recounted that for Smith, “the mental problem, having your friends not talk to you, that was the toughest part to deal with.” Hugh Morgan, another colleague at the meeting, remembered that Smith compared herself to an individual living in the Soviet Union. Smith said that one moment you were a citizen of the country, and then you were suddenly declared a “nonperson” and launched into exile. Morgan recalled, “Some of her biggest enemies were (people who had been) her friends; she was an integral part of the white establishment of Holmes County.” Morgan noted that by the 1970s, Smith found that actually going to her office was too great an emotional burden. He said,

In later years, she never went to her office to work. She would work at home, and her husband would take the stuff down to the paper. In the last few years, she didn’t do a lot of the reporting. But she still hung on. The whole thing was very, very emotional.¹⁸

Morgan concluded, “She just asked for justice and was pretty surprised when people didn’t see it that way. But she stuck to her guns, and that’s where she is heroic.”¹⁹

Smith not only had to deal with the open wounds from her battles with the white power structure in the 1960s, she had to grapple with a new dynamic of black empowerment in the 1970s. She had to adjust to the rise of African American participation in every aspect of life. By 1975, Smith’s relationship with black activists had become increasingly complicated. Some of Smith’s black allies in the 1960s became estranged from her in the 1970s. They charged that she maintained an attitude of paternalism. She viewed her role as that of a guide

¹⁸ Ibid., *Grassroots 1987*.

¹⁹ Ibid., *Grassroots 1987*.

to the emerging black power base. Many black leaders and activists resented Smith's criticisms of the positions they took during the decade. One African American in Holmes County who clearly experienced a breach with Smith was Congressman Robert Clark. In reflection upon his relationship with Smith between the mid-1960s and the early 1980s, he bluntly stated that Smith's paternalism alienated many of her former allies. He said,

There was a time when blacks could not speak for themselves and when Miss Hazel spoke for them. But when blacks began to speak for themselves, it should have been a shared thing. Hazel didn't realize that. She still wanted to tell people what to do. There was a demise in black's relationship with the paper because of that. It was a real unfortunate thing.²⁰

Smith had, of course, never planned on being an ally of the civil rights movement. In her formative years, 1914 to the early 1930s, she inculcated the formal and informal rules of Jim Crow protocol. She had embraced many components of this racist system and expressed them throughout the first twenty-five years of her career. Even into the early 1960s, she made it clear that she was not advocating integration. Continual pressure from the Citizens' Council caused an evolution in her thinking, and eventually she became an accepted ally of the civil rights movement. She and African American activists found common ground in the 1960s, but even that relationship found Smith in a position of power and leadership. As African Americans gained more say in the affairs of Holmes County, conflict developed.

²⁰ Robert Clark, quoted in Lee Freeland, "Time Closes Lexington Newspaper that Battled Racism" *Jackson Clarion Ledger* and *Jackson Daily News*, 5 January 1986; For a biography of Clark, see Will D. Campbell, *Robert G. Clark's Journey to the House: A Black Politician's Story* (Jackson, Mississippi: University Press of Mississippi, 2003).

Smith's friction with Clark began in 1967. Robert Clark was running to be the first black legislator in Mississippi since the 1890s. Other black candidates ran for several local positions in Holmes County as well. Smith decided to run for the office of state senator. This angered many black leaders in Holmes County because it complicated their election strategy. Clark and the other black candidates planned to avoid the Democratic primary in August and run as Independents in November. They believed that white Democrats planned to use chicanery to prevent African Americans from winning elective posts within the primary. Thus, avoiding the first primary would help their cause. Smith complicated the issue by running in the first place, and by running as a Democrat. Thus, when were blacks supposed to vote, in both primaries or only in November? Most African Americans did not vote in August. Smith still managed to come in in second in the primary, but lost to incumbent Ollie Mohammed in the November run-off. Clark won and went to the state legislature.²¹

Since late 1962, African Americans in Holmes County had put forth a concentrated effort to gain political inroads. Black Mississippians formed the Freedom Democratic Party (FDP) in 1964 to promote black franchise and equality. Holmes County activists joined this organization. Smith was the only white journalist allowed to attend the FDP's private strategy meetings at the Democratic National Convention in Atlantic City, New Jersey in 1964. The FDP was a leading force in Holmes County throughout the 1960s and early 1970s. The party promoted the election of Clark and

²¹ Susan Lorenzi Sojourner, *Thunder of Freedom: Black Leadership and the Transformation of 1960s Mississippi* (Lexington, Kentucky: University Press of Kentucky, 2013), 259-260.

other African Americans in the county in 1967. After Clark won office, Holmes FDP leaders came into conflict with Smith. Like any organization in the county, she believed the FDP should come under public scrutiny. Thus, she thought it her right to be critical of the FDP if needed. On the other hand, many FDP leaders found Smith's comments to be patronizing. They wanted to call the shots and did not appreciate Smith's input or criticism. If the FDP made mistakes, then they made mistakes. The point is that the mistakes would be their own. For many in the FDP, Smith had been ally, but by the early 1970s she was just another white person telling them how to do things. They resented Smith's overshadowing and critique of their efforts.²²

Smith had her own problems with the FDP as well. As Hodding Carter III noted, Smith thought many FDP members were too militant and too focused on race alone. Carter said that Smith became concerned about the FDP idea that was evolving which said, "If it's black it's right, and if it's white it's not." Smith's independence had put at her at odds with the white establishment, but this sentiment did the same went with the black establishment. Carter noted that Smith criticized any group that she felt was out of line, white or black. He said, "that's something to remember and it's also something that was resented. Hazel basically was Hazel. She wrote from her own convictions and what was involved. A lot of young activists did not like Hazel at all."²³

When Robert Clark won the congressional seat in 1967, he received almost simultaneous praise and criticism from Smith's pen. Obviously, many whites in Holmes County still rejected this overturning of the racial status quo, but Smith welcomed the

²²Mark Newman, "Hazel Brannon Smith and Holmes County, Mississippi, 1936-1964," 83, 87;
²³ John Whalen, *Maverick Under the Magnolias: The Hazel Brannon Smith Story*, 178-179, 226-227. Hodding Carter III took over the helm of the *Delta Democrat-Times* from his father in 1962.

change. Of Clark, she wrote, “We know he will make Holmes County an honest and conscientious legislator. We believe he will do everything in his power to serve all the peoples of Holmes County.”²⁴

Yet, after less than a month in office, Smith criticized Clark for attending the Nation of Islam convention in Detroit. The organization had gained national fame in the early 1960s through its main spokesman, Malcolm X. The militant activist was assassinated in 1965. The organization vociferously condemned the United States for practicing racism and demanded a separate homeland for African Americans. In Smith’s mind, the group was too radical, and Clark’s attendance only ratcheted up tensions back at home. Smith wrote,

Far be it from us to tell Representative Clark where to speak or where not to – he’s a grown man. But many of his friends are uneasy, disappointed in him, and genuinely concerned. They feel he has ‘let them down.’ It does seem we have enough problems in Holmes County to keep anyone busy – to say nothing of Mississippi.²⁵

Clark and many of his black constituents did not appreciate the chastisement.

Smith ran afoul of many in the black community when she again sought the state senate seat in 1971. As in the 1967 effort, she lost due to her unwillingness to campaign among African American voters. Instead, she expected to receive black votes because of her efforts on their behalf in the 1960s. Hal DeCell, a friend of Smith’s and the editor of the *Deer Creek Pilot*, commented, “She automatically thought she would get every black vote. She got the hell beat out of her and it broke her heart. I tried to tell her there’s no

²⁴ Ibid., 234.

²⁵ Ibid., 235.

such thing as political gratitude.” Smith’s sense of entitlement and refusal to court black votes more than likely cost her the election.²⁶

As the decade progressed, she became more and more estranged from the black community. Bruce Hill, owner of the Holmes County *Herald* and Smith’s main competitor, commented,

It was almost like a child coming of age who no longer needs his mother. Hazel was a great help to blacks for a long time, but as they came into their own in Holmes County, they developed their own leadership. It was another era, and they didn't need her. It wasn't really rejection, but she didn't understand.²⁷

The divide only widened in January 1973 when a young black man named J.W. Young died while in custody in the Holmes County jail. The FDP decried the young man’s death and denounced the episode as an example of police brutality. As a result, the FDP called for blacks to once again boycott white stores in order to put pressure on Lexington officials and bring about better treatment toward African Americans by the police.²⁸

Smith’s alienation from the white community stemmed from her denouncing police brutality against blacks all the way back to the Byrd shooting in 1954. However, in the wake of the Young death, she balked. She reported in the February 1, 1973 edition of the *Advertiser* that a coroner’s autopsy found that Young had died of natural causes. She concluded that a boycott was not needed and would only serve to hurt the community and upset what she termed “the delicate balance” that had been built between blacks and

²⁶ Hal DeCell quoted in John Whalen, *Maverick Under the Magnolias*, 249.

²⁷ *Ibid.*, *Maverick Under the Magnolias*, 243; Bruce Hill quoted in Fred Grimm, “Crusader Hazel Smith, Champion for Civil Rights, Fights Final Battle Alone and Forgotten,” *Chicago Tribune*, 27 March 1986.

²⁸ *Lexington Advertiser*, 1, 8 February 1973.

whites. She noted that African Americans had held a meeting over the notion of a boycott, and that the attendees had split over whether or not to impose sanctions. Smith had always believed that her role as a journalist was to promote ideas which served the community good and denounce those that seemed detrimental. She told her readers that the boycott would fall under the latter category. The FDP ignored Smith's pleas and began an economic boycott.²⁹

As the boycott lasted into the spring of 1973, Smith continued to criticize the FDP and its tactics. In April, she accused the FDP leaders of pressuring other blacks to join the boycott. Smith argued that the black citizens of Holmes County, like its fellow white citizens, wanted the freedom of choice to make up their own minds. She shockingly said that if the FDP continued down the path of calling for total black uniformity, then they would go down in history "as a sort of Black Citizens' Council, which will be ultimately rejected and doomed by the black people of this county. We don't believe the FDP wants that. Please think on it." On the front page of the *Advertiser*, Smith posted an announcement from a group that opposed the boycott and called themselves "the voice of the working people." Smith called the leaders of the FDP her friends but pointedly said that they were "violating the principles of freedom, fair play, and personal choice on which they were founded – and which we personally helped to support." She concluded that blacks did not want to be dictated to any more than whites and that the boycott was hurting working African Americans in Lexington more than any other group.³⁰

²⁹ *Lexington Advertiser*, 1, 8 February 1973.

³⁰ *Ibid.*, 5 April 1973.

Smith's estrangement from the FDP deepened in April. She held a well-known reputation for attacking any group that she felt was abusing its authority and damaging the health of the community. This meant black groups as well as white groups. Smith heard accounts that FDP officials had accosted some young black students who bought cookies from a store that was being boycotted. According to Smith's sources, FDP officials brought the students into the FDP office and paddled them. This horrified the editor, and she warned that local blacks would reject the FDP for these kinds of tactics. She wrote, "It's really too bad that an organization which in the past has done so much good (but not as much good as it now claims), has ruined itself for all time with the overwhelming majority of the people of Holmes County." She reported two weeks later that the grand jury indicted several FDP officials for "unlawful boycott and conspiracy." African Americans created the FDP in the early 1960s in an attempt to wrangle political power and social justice from the white establishment. They still felt the tactics of protest and boycott were viable weapons in the early 1970s. Smith disagreed and that placed her in the position of no longer being their ally but an adversary.³¹

During the months Smith chastised the FDP, Charles Bailey, a nineteen-year-old black man, was arrested for the murder of Amos Hampton, his brother-in-law, and one of Lexington's two black policemen. As Bailey's trial unfolded, Smith wrote about the case. On March 1, Smith splashed Amos Hampton's picture on the front page of the paper and lamented his death. She told her readers that she hoped his killer would receive justice. To Smith's shock, however, an all-black jury acquitted Bailey in May, 1973. Smith reported that after the reading of the verdict, African Americans in the

³¹ Ibid., 12, 26 April 1973.

courtroom erupted in a “prolonged roar.” To make matters worse, she reported that Bailey had boasted about killing Hampton. In fact Bailey declared that he “intended to kill both of the sons of bitches.” He was referring to the other black policeman in town. Smith said she was appalled not only at the verdict, but also the outburst in court. She wrote, “Whether they realize it or not, their attitude bodes no good for the future and safety of Holmes County and its people, including those who applaud the court’s decision.”³²

Her comments further alienated many of her former allies. Smith reminded her readers that she had “fought more sheriffs of Holmes County than any other individual” and “had the scars and the cost of several civil suits to prove it.” She said she fought them “when they were wrong - not upholding the law - and not acting in the best interest of Holmes County and its people.” In Smith’s opinion, Holmes County had “the most sensitive and understanding enforcement of the law in this county ever.” She noted that an FDP flier claimed that the black community had suffered under “a reign of terror” for the previous seven months. Smith considered this claim to be ludicrous “and everyone in Holmes County knows it.” If the claim had had any merit “you would have known about it from this newspaper.”³³

Smith balanced her increasingly uneasy relationship with many African American leaders in the county by highlighting positive black newsmakers on the front page of her paper. Whereas African Americans remained almost invisible in the *Holmes County Herald* throughout the 1960s unless they committed crimes or were being denounced for

³² Ibid., 3 May 1973.

³³ Ibid., 3 May 1973.

their civil rights activity, Smith had highlighted black achievement in the county. She continued this practice in the 1970s as African Americans gained more and more prominence in the county's leadership positions.

A perusal of the *Lexington Advertiser* from the early 1970s reveal article after article on black political and social groups, athletic events, and weddings. For example, in May of 1970, Smith published a photograph and an article on the front page concerning thirteen black educators who were retiring in the county. In September 1973, Smith published an article (with photo) celebrating the accomplishments of Congressman Robert Clark on his fifth anniversary as a state legislator. In June 1976, Smith commended her her old friend Arenia Mallory, upon her retirement after 40 years as head of the local black school, Saints Jr. College. When Mallory died a year later, Smith eulogized Mallory in her *Through Hazel Eyes* column. She described the educator as “a woman you could not forget.”³⁴

Smith's practice of giving positive attention to African Americans was not something that suddenly occurred in the post civil rights area. Even while she was espousing Jim Crow principles in the 1940s and 1950s, she included articles (though rarely ever on the front page) that highlighted black achievement. Front-page pieces on black achievement in the 1970s served more than one purpose. The reports demonstrated her evolution on the place of African Americans in the community. The black citizens of Holmes County, like their white counterparts, deserved equal opportunity and warranted praise when they achieved. Publishing black news on the front page made good business sense as well. In a county where the black population topped over 70%, it stood to

³⁴ Ibid., 7 May 1970, 13 September 1973, 29 August 1974, 3 June 1976, 24 March 1977.

reason that more black people would buy Smith's paper if they saw more black people in its pages.

Thus, Smith continued to highlight black newsmakers. In 1977, Smith eulogized famed Mississippi civil rights activist Fannie Lou Hamer. Smith said she always considered Hamer a friend ever since they had met in the early 1960s. The editor valued Hamer's plain spoken forthrightness and concluded that she "never heard anything from the her lips that was not the gospel truth." In May of 1978, Smith paid homage to Hartman Turnbow, one of the county's early civil rights activists. Back in April 1963, Turnbow and several black farmers from the community of Mileston, in the Delta part of Holmes County, had attempted to register to vote. Turnbow paid for his bravado by having his home firebombed in May, 1963, and was later shot at in the summer of 1964. In the article, she noted that blacks in Mileston had held a "Hartman Turnbow Day" where they recounted his efforts and raised over \$500 in his honor. Smith had fully covered Turnbow and others' efforts in the 1960s and denounced the violence aimed them. In reflection upon county residents like Turnbow, she concluded, "I think we owe these early blacks a great debt -although few recognized it at the time...But they have made and will continue to make-as long as they live-an extremely valuable contribution to Holmes County and our state."³⁵

One can see the dual nature of Smith's relationship with African Americans through her columns. Smith praised black efforts, but reserved the right to condemn actions she thought were detrimental to the community. From the perspective of many black activists, detrimental was in the eye of the beholder. Melanie Neilson commented

³⁵ Ibid., 24 March 1977, 11 May 1978.

on Smith's place in this changing dynamic in Holmes County. A white woman, she grew up in Lexington in the 1960s and 1970. She graduated from the all white Central Holmes Academy, but then shocked her family and peers by serving on Robert Clark's two failed campaigns to win a seat to the U.S. House of Representatives in 1982 and 1984. Neilson lauded Smith's fight in the 1950s and 1960s but also analyzed Smith's struggle to adapt to the post-civil rights dynamic. Neilson described Smith as one of "the authors of much good in Lexington, and who had the conviction needed to work with blacks under the disapproving eyes of neighbors." Neilson said that many whites in Holmes County considered people like Smith to be liberal, "yet there was a certain holdover of the old order within them which prevented them from favoring integration." Neilson concluded that Smith and the handful of moderates in the county "were first and foremost, pragmatists. If one wished to make a home in Holmes County, they reasoned, working with blacks simply made good common sense."³⁶

Despite the alliances of the past, and the glowing tributes to past pioneers like Arenia Mallory, Fannie Lou Hamer, and Hartman Turnbow, Smith fell afoul of younger and more militant activists in the late 1970s. Many of these were too young to have served in the trenches with her, and they did not appreciate her input. Though some changes had occurred in Holmes County, many African Americans still seethed about the conditions they faced in Lexington and the rest of the county. Tensions erupted into conflict again in 1978. Many blacks in Lexington claimed that white police officers had committed several acts of brutality and intimidation, and that the mayor and the city

³⁶ Melanie Neilson, *Even Mississippi* (Tuscaloosa, Alabama: University of Alabama Press, 1989), 42.

council refused to acknowledge them. One of these included the episode of Shirley Boyd, a black woman that locals repeatedly described as “attractive.” African Americans in Lexington claimed that two white officers took Boyd into custody for the purpose of trying to persuade her to have sex with them. When she refused, the officers beat Boyd and released her. Boyd later committed suicide in 1979.³⁷

Black activists were not only outraged about the Shirley Boyd incident, they also charged that Lexington merchants were practicing hiring discrimination. As a result, many in the African American community organized and called for an economic boycott to force Lexington officials to address their concerns. As she had always done, Smith weighed in on the issue because she believed that it threatened the community’s harmony and health. Her conclusions once again differed with those of many in the black community.³⁸

An article appeared in the February 1979 edition of *Ebony* magazine that voiced the concerns of rural black people across the South. Lexington activists gave interviews for the article. Black leaders in Lexington rejected the idea that Holmes County stood as a part of the New South. Instead, one activist said it “was the Old South with a smile.” For African Americans, discrimination was still the name of the game in Lexington. That included stores that only hired black people to do menial work. Protesters pointed out that the Holmes County hospital only had three black nurses out of a total of thirty-three. One activist said, “They will hire you in the store to push a broom or mop, but they won’t

³⁷ Sylvia Reedy Gist, *Educating a Rural Southern Community: A History of Schooling for Blacks in Holmes County, Mississippi, 1870 to 1993* (Pelham, Alabama: Productivity Unlimited Publishers, 1995) 220-222.

³⁸ *Ibid.*, 222

hire you to work a cash register.” According to the article, all five of the white doctor’s offices in Lexington still had an “understanding” that waiting rooms were segregated. One doctor still had not painted over the “colored” and “white” labels on his two entrance doors. The article noted that all but the town’s poorest whites were now attending the segregated school, Central Holmes Academy. In reference to the academy, one white leader of Lexington said, “That’s the way we want it. The federal government wasn’t going to tell us what to do!” In the minds of many African Americans, change was not that apparent in Lexington.³⁹

Through the late summer of 1978, tension intensified between African Americans and the Lexington establishment. Many in the black community helped form a group called the Concerned Citizens of Holmes County. They later joined forces with a larger organization called the United League of Mississippi. Smith tried to mediate between the protesters and Lexington officials. In July, Smith reported on the arrest and trial of a young 23-year-old African American male named John Henry Williams. Williams had been part of a group marching in protest against Lexington merchants. Lexington police arrested Williams and charged him with violating a 1972 state law that prohibited “Threats or coercion to prevent lawful conduct of a business.” City Judge Ed Tye Nielson found Williams guilty but then reduced his sentence from a \$1000 fine to \$750, and his jail time from twelve months to three. Other arrests and sentences came in the following weeks resulting in a lawsuit filed by local blacks against Lexington officials

³⁹ Ron Harris, “The Myth of the ‘New South:’ It’s the ‘Old South’ With a Smile,” *Ebony*, 34, no. 4 (February 1979), 53-62.

including Mayor Billy Martin, Chief of Police Ed Ellison, City Judge Ed Tye Nielson, and several Lexington merchants.⁴⁰

Smith sought to mediate and find solutions but met with limited success. In late July 1978, she asked her readers to step back and view the monumental changes since 1954. She argued that the county had “made real progress” but she admitted “we have not made as much progress personally as we would like.” She noted that many merchants still advertised in the *Herald* but not in her paper, but she added “I am not falling out with them - I never did fall out with them.” She urged her readers to “Look back and see whence we came-look forward and see where we are headed.”⁴¹

Regardless of the groups at odds with each other, Smith made sure all sides were equally covered in her newspapers. In August 1978, she included commentary from three participants in the conflict. She published a front-page article written by Lexington Mayor Billy Martin. In the piece, Martin rejected the charges of police brutality and noted that no charges had actually been filed. Against the charge of job discrimination, the Mayor countered that a black female applicant had been offered a job, but had turned it down. Martin stressed that the black activists actually wanted “no settlement,” and that the boycott hurt working class merchants. A week later, Smith published a letter by a group calling themselves the “Better Concerned Citizens of Holmes County.” This group affirmed Mayor and the Chief of Police and asked the paper’s readers to disregard the marchers and patronize Lexington’s merchants. In the same issue, Smith printed a front-page article by the United League of Holmes County that rejected Mayor Martin’s

⁴⁰ *Lexington Advertiser*, 6, 13 July, 7 September 1978.

⁴¹ *Ibid.*, 27 July 1978.

claims. The black activist group restated its claim of police brutality by the chief of police and called for Lexington merchants to hire more black applicants. Smith found herself caught between a rock and hard place by the late 1970s. Many of her white peers still considered an outlier, and many black activists rejected her moderation and considered her a part of the white establishment. Yet, she still believed her role was to help the community, thus she presented all sides of the issue in order to help the community find a solution.⁴²

Smith thought that finding some kind of compromise would bring about peace for all the people of Lexington. In the August 31, 1978 *Advertiser*, she published a signed appeal by Congressman Robert Clark to all groups involved. Clark had tried to mediate between Lexington officials, merchants, and those involved in the protest. He had failed to bring the groups to a working compromise. He then put forth two alternatives. The first called for a six-person committee to be formed. Three members would come from the Concerned Citizens group and the other three would consist of three people authorized to represent the Lexington City board. These six would meet until they hammered out an agreement. The second alternative asked for the groups to agree to bring in an arbitrator, and until an agreement had been reached, Clark asked that the U.S. Civil Rights Commission come in and investigate the incident involving Shirley Boyd.⁴³

Smith herself had suffered under an economic boycott for over a decade from the late 1950s to the late 1960s and suffered permanent financial ruin. She understood in a personally painful way how a boycott could decimate one's business. Thus, she

⁴² Ibid., 10, 17 August 1978.

⁴³ Ibid., 31 August 1978.

considered the boycott ill-conceived and damaging to race relations and the economy of Holmes County. That put her at odds with the black leadership involved with the Concerned Citizens/Union League of Holmes County.

In the same August 31, 1978 edition that contained Clark's plea for common ground, Smith voiced her personal antagonism toward the boycott and her hope that it would end. Her remarks came at the end of a front-page announcement by the United League of Mississippi. The notice informed the reader of a planned march in the Lexington on Saturday, September 2. The statement invited "All progressive people who are concerned about liberating black and oppressed people" to come and march, and concluded, "Let's show the Klan and the power structure that we are not afraid and that we will not back down until all of our grievances are met." Smith could not let the last statement go without personal comment. Entitled "Editor's Note (added)" she declared:

"So far as I know, there is no Klan (Ku Klux Klan) anywhere in Holmes County-and I, personally hope there never will be. White and Black TOGETHER is the only thing that can save Holmes County from destruction and keep our communities alive. All of us should be praying, not marching."

Her rejection of the boycotters reaffirmed to her black detractors that Smith now stood in line with the white establishment.⁴⁴

Smith continued to give full coverage to the boycott while editorially panning it. In late August 1978, she reported on the arrest of twelve boycotters, one of whom was also charged in assaulting a Lexington police officer. In the September 7, 1978 *Advertiser*, Smith included several pictures of the United League of Mississippi's march through Lexington as well as a notice that Lexington officials had been hit with a federal

⁴⁴ Ibid., 31 August 1978.

lawsuit, filed in the state capital of Jackson. The lawsuit charged them with “discrimination in hiring practices and other illegal unconstitutional actions.”⁴⁵

Concerning the United League of Mississippi, Smith sought to inform her readers. In the past, she wrote informative articles about Citizens’ Council meetings and goings on, even though she vehemently disagreed with the organization’s tactics. She also disagreed with the tactics of the United League, but she gave the group coverage in her papers. In her *Through Hazel Eyes* column, Smith gave her impressions of Alfred “Skip” Robinson, the head of the United League of Mississippi, and his speech at the Lexington march. She admitted that she, like many, worried “that Mr. Robinson would stir up people and make our already serious situation in Lexington even worse.” She was pleasantly surprised. She concluded that Robinson was not a rabble-rouser and had eloquently voiced the concerns of many people in Holmes Count and the state at large. Smith applauded Robinson’s support for not just civil rights but human rights. She said that Robinson spoke of wanting justice, but she countered that both sides had to “be able not only to talk AT or talk ABOUT but to talk TO each other. WHITE AND BLACK TOGETHER.” Here Smith took the offensive and chided the boycotters. She said that the human rights of all people in Holmes County were at stake. People had “a ‘human right’ not to trade with a person or business where you are treated somewhat less than human. But you do not have a right to intimidate or keep anyone else from trading at any store.” To do so meant that you were violating the human rights of others, and in fact, it was “ILLEGAL.” She concluded:

⁴⁵ Ibid., 31 August, 7 September 1978.

Perhaps if representatives of the responsible Black community would join with responsible Lexington business men and women – and make an honest effort at communication on both sides, we might be taking the first step toward a solution of our social problems that has within it the seeds of economic destruction, not just for Whites, but the large number of Blacks who are employed in the stores and businesses all round and off Court Square in Lexington.⁴⁶

She asked who was willing to take the first step. She argued, “False pride is a luxury that none can afford.”⁴⁷

For many black leaders, Smith served as an impediment to achieving their goals. This conclusion can be drawn from a work created by young African Americans from Holmes County. By the late 1980s, the United League of Holmes County had morphed into an organization known as the Rural Organization and Cultural Center (ROCC). This group created an oral history project where young people interviewed several of the original black activists from the early 1960s. In the introductory essay, Jay MacLeod, an instructor with the ROCC, offered a broad but pointed analysis of Smith’s career. MacLeod contended that pressure from groups like the White Citizens’ Council “pushed Smith further and further into a no-man’s land between the races.” MacLeod noted that blacks appreciated Smith’s help “but her domineering paternalism alienated many black activists. In a charged field of racial polarization, Hazel Brannon Smith exemplified the valiance, trials, and limitations of white liberals.”⁴⁸

While black activists disagreed with Smith, the courts sided with her view when they ruled that the Lexington boycott was unwarranted. Smith reported in December,

⁴⁶ Ibid., 7 September 1978.

⁴⁷ Ibid., 7 September 1978.

⁴⁸ Jay MacLeod, “Introduction: Racism, Resistance, and the Origin of the Holmes County Movement” in Youth of the Rural Organization and Cultural Center, *Minds Stayed on Freedom: The Civil Rights Struggled in the Rural South* (Boulder, Colorado: Westview Press, 1991), 12.

1978 on the Chancery Court in nearby Yazoo County issuing a temporary writ of injunction for Lexington merchants against Arnett Lewis and other defendants in Lexington. The writ barred the Concerned Citizens/United League group from further boycotts and open demonstrations to prevent trade within seventy-five feet of Lexington businesses.⁴⁹

As the weeks passed, the courts continued to rule against the protesters. During the third week of December, 1978, a federal judge refused to overturn the Chancery Court's ruling. Smith reported that the leaders of the boycott led a march and a rally in Lexington in protest of the court ruling. The police chose to make no arrests, and it appeared that the boycott was basically neutered. In March, 1979, Smith informed her readers that a U.S. Magistrate dismissed the lawsuit by the boycotters against Chief Ed Ellison and other Lexington officials.⁵⁰

Caught in the middle of this maelstrom, it must have been difficult for the participants on either side of the protest to appreciate the irony of their situation. Smith did. This can be seen in her juxtaposition of headlines in March of 1979. In a large caption, Smith reported that a federal court had rejected the lawsuit by the Concerned Citizens/Union League group against Lexington officials. Yet right next to that headline, Smith placed an election notice and photograph of Howard Huggins, a candidate for Holmes County Sheriff. Huggins went on to win the election and become the first African American sheriff in Holmes County. An African American has served as Sheriff in Holmes County for the thirty-four years since. Through direct protest and working the

⁴⁹ *Lexington Advertiser*, 14 December 1978.

⁵⁰ *Ibid.*, 14 December 1978, 15 March 1979.

elective process, African Americans in Holmes County made headway. Change may have not been coming quickly enough for many, but significant change was occurring.⁵¹

Smith wanted to diffuse the tensions that were threatening to tear the community apart. Thus, she took time in the May 24, 1979 *Advertiser* to commemorate the twenty-fifth anniversary of the *Brown* decision that struck down segregation. She described the court's ruling as one "that shook the Deep South to its very roots and inspired great fear in the breasts of many otherwise brave men and community leaders." She reprinted parts of her *Through Hazel Eyes* column from May 20, 1954 where she said that *Brown* was "probably the most complex problem we have ever had to work out in the South and it is going to require the very best that is in us to solve it to the best interests of all concerned. But solve it we will." She noted that the decision probably arose from whites not doing enough to "improve Negro schools throughout the South." Though she was against the decision in 1954, she admitted that the "Supreme Court may be morally right" by striking down separate but equal but also knew full well that, "The present situation has all of the ingredients necessary for a bloody revolution-if people don't keep their heads." Smith recounted the previous twenty five years and noted that while communities maintained "a semblance of peace," the "angry voices in Mississippi drew more attention than those of most cities in the South-and a racist image was established which only now is beginning to fade."⁵²

That being said, the changes in twenty-five years astounded Smith. She wrote,

The progress made in Mississippi has been nothing less than fantastic, almost unbelievable. Never, in my wildest imagination did I dream we

⁵¹ Ibid., 15 March 1979.

⁵² Ibid., 24 May 1979

would make the progress we have made, white and black together. We may still have a way to go-and we have-but it is not as far as we have come.⁵³

The editor was asking all groups to step back and reflect on how far down the road the state had come since 1954 and work together for a better future.

In Smith's mind, when either whites or blacks focused solely on race, it only retarded progress. In November 1979, she published a press release given by Arnett Lewis, spokesman for the United League of Holmes County. Lewis called for African Americans in Holmes County to only vote for black candidates. Lewis promised African Americans that a day was fast approaching where blacks would see "a change for the people of Holmes County-from a white controlled power structure of elected officials to a distribution of its power to the majority black citizens." Smith added her own take along with the press release. She considered the idea that all blacks should be uniform in their voting to be "dead wrong." She reminded her readers of the struggles she had faced because of racial fear. Though she had worked in Holmes County for 43 years, she feared at times that she would not be able to publish, "because of fear engendered in so many people of Holmes County by a comparatively small organization founded on a false premise that was not in the best interest of Holmes County or its people." The White Citizens' Council had tried to put her out of business, but, she concluded, "all of that is in the past." For Smith a spirit of cooperation now existed between blacks and whites.⁵⁴

Thus, Smith abhorred Lewis's idea that said black voters should only vote for black candidates. She stressed that this kind of thinking would be disastrous for Holmes

⁵³ Ibid., 24 May 1979.

⁵⁴ Ibid., 1 November 1979.

County. She wrote that blacks who voted for only black candidates were just as wrongheaded as whites who only voted for white candidates. She concluded, “The people of Holmes County have no future if its citizens are polarized on the basis of color.” She chided Lewis by saying,

Don’t be a racist. We are a family under God-and no man or woman should try to turn one race against another. We are all equal under the law-and we are equal in God’s sight. We must be able to live with mutual feelings of humanity and compassion.⁵⁵

Smith noted a week after the election that its results made it clear that blacks and white voters in the county did not uniformly vote along color lines. In her mind, cooperation between blacks and whites would be the only way for the county to make progress. She concluded, “I sincerely believe that the great majority of Holmes Countians, white and black, believe and feel as I do.” Smith faithfully published the comments and thoughts of people she disagreed with, but she in turn believed in the right to criticize those comments if she thought they were harmful to the community at large. Though she called for community cohesion, her criticisms of leaders like Arnett Lewis only estranged her even further from many in the black community.⁵⁶

The racial tensions Smith faced in Holmes County surfaced elsewhere. In early November 1979, Smith attended a meeting in Jackson hosted by Tougaloo and Millsaps Colleges. Students at Tougaloo, a predominantly black college, had helped foster civil rights activities in the early 1960s. Millsaps was a private Methodist College that had seen many of its faculty and students work for racial reconciliation during the same period. The meeting was supposed to be a celebration of the fifteen-year anniversary

⁵⁵ Ibid., 1 November 1979.

⁵⁶ Ibid., 15 November 1979.

since Freedom Summer of 1964 when black and white civil rights workers had inundated the state in order to promote voter education among blacks and throw a spotlight on the inequalities in Mississippi. What Smith and others encountered at the meeting was not a “celebration of amazing change” but “bitterness” by many African Americans who had taken part in the Freedom Summer effort. Their anger stemmed from the fact that economic opportunity and parity for blacks lagged far behind civil rights gains like the franchise. Many of those at the meeting aimed their harshest criticism not at the entrenched racists in charge in Mississippi in the 1960s, but at the Kennedy and Johnson administrations for not going far enough in promoting civil rights. Those at the meeting aimed some of the venom at Smith and other newspaper editors for also not going enough in areas like the integration of local churches and doctor’s clinics. A *New York Times* reporter who covered the meeting made this observation, “I thought the main source of bitterness was ideological. It was the familiar phenomenon of those who want a total transformation of society hating gradual reformers.” This observation may shed light concerning why Smith did not find acceptance with black activists in Holmes County in the late 1970s and early 1980s.⁵⁷

Two realities become abundantly clear in surveying the last six years of Smith’s career (1979-1985). One, while Smith published the views of black activists in the county, she never found common ground with them. Two, the struggles and pressures of running a newspaper in Holmes County for over 45 years had not only devastated her

⁵⁷ Anthony Lewis, “Abroad At Home: Winds of Change,” *New York Times*, 5 November 1979, A19; Arthur J. Kaul, “Hazel Brannon Smith and the Lexington Advertiser,” in David R. Davies, ed., *The Press and Race: Mississippi Journalists Confront the Movement* (Jackson, Mississippi: University Press of Mississippi), 260.

financially but also worn her down emotionally and psychologically. As she wound down her career, Smith admitted the strain had almost gotten to her, and she was forced to plead with her readers for support in order to keep her newspaper afloat.

The continuing tension with Arnett Lewis and his group flared up again in the early 1981. In May of that year, Smith reported that she had received a press release from associates of Lewis that contained a list of injustices committed against blacks in the county. Smith never shied away from printing controversial stories if they were factual, but she refused to publish the “article” because she viewed it as “libelous opinion” and “a conglomeration of alleged ‘facts.’” In Smith’s view, publishing the press release would not bring dark deeds to light, but only serve as propaganda to further enflame tensions. She refused to be simply a sounding board for any group. She concluded that she had spent her career working for a responsible press and had a proven record of fighting for “human rights.” She reminded her readers, “It has cost me a fortune and endangered her life.”⁵⁸

The boycott and subsequent debt, the years of character assassination, the rejection by many of her peers in Holmes County, and the falling out with many of the county’s black leaders left its mark on Smith. She admitted as much in a February 1980 column. Forty-four years had passed since she had arrived in Holmes County as a fresh faced, determined, and idealistic twenty two year-old college graduate. In 1980, she was almost sixty-six years old, still deep in debt, and just plain tired. In the February column, she told her readers that she had awoken at 6:30 a.m. earlier in the week in order to write her column. As she sat at her desk, she pondered what to write. What was the point

⁵⁸ Ibid., 7 May 1981.

since she had clearly stated everything thing she believed? Smith admitted “for a long time” she had been “living and trying to work” under “unbearable tension.”⁵⁹

Smith recounted how she had recently opened a letter that caused her to weep, yet not with tears of grief, but of satisfaction and vindication. The letter came from a black woman named Dorothy Bounds who lived in Chicago but had grown up in Lexington. Smith said the letter represented “in a remarkable way. . . almost totally what my life as an editor (and human being) in Holmes County is all about.” She then reprinted the letter in its entirety. Bounds told Smith that she had graduated from the all-black Saints Jr. College in 1955 and had lived most of her life in Chicago. She thanked the Lexington editor for keeping her abreast of the news from her hometown. She wrote,

The time has come that we as a people of God should take time out and thank the people who have served us for so many years. It is time to exalt our people when they have done, or are doing a good job. It is time to give our sisters and brothers flowers while they yet live. So today, take your flowers, and know that you have truly earned them.⁶⁰

Bounds expressed her fond memory of how Smith treated people. She said,

I cannot forget that even as a child I can still remember how kind you were to people, whether they were black or white and that has always stayed with me. So you see you have planted a beautiful seed that maybe you didn't know about. I am sure that must be a star in your crown.⁶¹

Bounds concluded by saying Smith was “truly a blessing.”⁶²

These words served as a soothing balm of appreciation and justification for Smith's career. She concluded the article by stating her philosophy as an editor and what she had tried to accomplish in over forty years in the state of Mississippi. She stressed

⁵⁹ Ibid., 21 February 1980.

⁶⁰ Ibid., 22 February 1980.

⁶¹ Ibid., 22 February 1980.

⁶² Ibid., 22 February 1980.

that she had worked to make the county better as had many. She believed that they all wanted the same goal, namely to make the county,

a place where every person is regarded and treated as a human being, where the law is upheld by everyone and respected regardless of race, color, or creed. Racism, white and black, must be stamped out in both races. It is God's way and the only way to live and be happy, to work and prosper, to live and die by. I love and care for all of you.⁶³

Despite the reflective tone of the tone of the column, the sixty-five year old editor was not ready to quit. She still wanted to make a go of her newspapers in Lexington and Durant. At different times in the early 1980s, Smith reminded her readers what she stood for and tried to get them to drum up more support for her papers. She wrote in March 1981 that it was clear to all that both Lexington and Durant only needed one newspaper each. Smith faced competition from the *Herald* in Lexington and until its closing in 1980, the *Durant Plaindealer* in Durant. Obviously, Smith desired for her papers to be the primary source of news for the county. She told her readers that she did not continue in the newspaper business for money. She said there was not enough money in the world to justify the long hours she still put in. She returned again to her career long theme of journalism as a source for community improvement. She wrote "Instead I work and do everything for the community I can because I love it - my Holmes County where the people I love most live. I am always ready and eager to serve you in every way possible and you all know it."⁶⁴

In reality, Smith's status and relevance in Holmes County only further eroded as the 1980s progressed. The United States lagged under an economic recession, and

⁶³ Ibid., 22 February 1980.

⁶⁴ Ibid., 21 March 1981.

dreadfully poor counties like Holmes County found hard times even harder. Smith still operated hundreds of thousands of dollars in debt, and her situation saw no improvement in sight. Her subscription rate reached less than 1,000. This was half of what her readership had been in the paper's heyday.⁶⁵

Smith saw it all slipping away. The desperation came out in an October 1982 column. She pleaded with the people of Holmes County to acknowledge her service to the county by supporting her paper and basically shouted for help. She wrote,

I have gone through hell and back since 1954-striving to work for peace and harmony in our entire county. I have never hurt anyone deliberately. But all of you know what I stand for as much as I know myself. Perhaps even better. I THINK IT IS TIME FOR PEOPLE TO TAKE A STAND ON WHAT THEY WANT FOR A NEWSPAPER AND WHAT KIND OF EDITOR THEY WANT.⁶⁶

Defending herself, Smith declared that individuals came to her all the time when they wanted things done in the county, but they failed to give her paper equal advertising treatment. Once again, she reminded her readers that the county could not support two papers (especially in Lexington). She believed if people supported her paper, then the community would benefit. She concluded,

It is the community and the people in it that suffer in the long run when it does not have a newspaper of integrity, a newspaper with guts and backbone, a newspaper that is not willing to see injustice prevail and remain silent, a newspaper that stands up for the rights of the people.⁶⁷

Smith confessed that she was tired of battling, and tired of the competition, and that whatever the county decided, she would abide by the decision.

⁶⁵ Cathy Trost, "Mississippi Editor Finds Crusade Different from 60s: Hazel Brannon Smith, Voice for Black Civil Rights Fights for Paper's Survival," *Wall Street Journal*, 8 May 1984; John Whalen, *Maverick Under the Magnolias*, 264.

⁶⁶ *Lexington Advertiser*, 14 October 1982.

⁶⁷ *Ibid.*, 14 October 1982.

Financially, Smith's papers were on life support. Personally, she was isolated and cut off from the world she once reveled in. Willie Wylie, an African American and Smith's pressman at the *Advertiser* for over forty years, commented about her social status in the last few years of her career. He recounted, "I remember when she'd get a huge box of Christmas cards every year. But the last few years, she got only one or two."⁶⁸

By the early 1980s, Smith found herself in a no man's land. Many of her peers from her first quarter century in Holmes County had never forgiven the editor for her civil rights stand. On top of that, she had fallen out with many of the people that she worked with during the civil rights movement days. The greatest example of this was Congressman Robert Clark. The editor seemed to have an on again/off again appreciation fest with Clark. As noted before, she commended him for his election to the state House in 1968 while almost immediately questioning his political judgment. She commended him in 1973 for his five-year anniversary in the state legislature, and published articles that gave insight into his struggles to gain acceptance in the all white legislature. In 1977, she reprinted a glowing article from the Jackson *Clarion Ledger* that chronicled Clark's struggles his first decade in the Mississippi House of Representatives. The fact that the *Clarion Ledger* was now publishing articles that praised black achievement was a monumental shift in itself. The article noted that Clark had overcome racist slights and had become chairman of the House Education Committee. He was the first black legislator in the 20th century to attain the chair of any legislative committee. In March 1980, Smith reprinted an article by friend and colleague Bill Minor on Clark's

⁶⁸ Fred Grimm, *Chicago Tribune*, 27 March 1986.

trying first year in the state legislature as he had to overcome many indignities committed against him by fellow legislators. At the time of the article, Clark had served in the state legislature twelve years. Smith concluded by saying, “Representative Clark has conducted himself very well and has been a Representative for all the people of Holmes County.”⁶⁹

Smith endorsed Clark in his two unsuccessful campaigns to win the congressional seat to the United States Congress in 1982 and 1984. The editor avowed that Clark was the best man in consideration for the position. According to Smith, Clark deserved to be elected because he was “concerned about all of the people of Holmes County and Mississippi.”⁷⁰

Even in her support of Clark, one can find a disturbing statement that may reveal the source for an underlying conflict between the white editor and the black legislator. In praising Clark and calling for his election to the U.S. House in 1982, Smith issued a curious line that Clark and others might have found paternalistic and offensive. The remark concerned Smith’s view about Clark’s tenure in the Mississippi legislature from 1968 to 1982. In the same article where she formally endorsed Clark, Smith made a comment about Clark’s fourteen-year career in the Mississippi legislature. She wrote, “Rep. Clark has conducted himself with dignity, and decorum-and behaved himself in Jackson.” Comments like this may have contributed to why Smith fell out with many in the black community. She came across to many African Americans as the one who held

⁶⁹ David Crary, Jackson *Clarion Ledger*, 29 December 1977; *Lexington Advertiser*, 13 March, 1980

⁷⁰ *Lexington Advertiser*, 19, 26 August, 1982.

the superior position. Clark himself gave credence to this assertion several years later in an interview with the *Jackson Clarion Ledger*. He said about Smith,

She never really accepted black people not doing what she wanted done. That was one of the things on which we didn't see eye to eye. I respected her. I loved her. But you don't want to trade one slave task-master for another task-master.⁷¹

Smith's paternalism toward the black community, her decade's long estrangement with many of her white neighbors, and her ever-present debt continued to marginalize her in Holmes County. Like a rubber band that is stretched too far, Smith found her life and career on the verge of snapping. On top of all this, a tragic personal event occurred in late 1982 that completely shattered her life. Once the break came, the editor was unable to recover.

⁷¹ Jerry Mitchell, "Opinionated Editor Alive to Receive Hamer Award," *Jackson Clarion Ledger*, 31 May 1993.

CHAPTER IX

EPILOGUE

Before she fell out with the white establishment in 1954, Hazel Brannon Smith had no worries about money. She owned the two major papers in Holmes County. The money rolled in, and it afforded her a lavish lifestyle that which included Lily Dache Hats, Gucci Handbags, world cruises, and convertible Cadillacs. All of that quickly ended once she became a critic of the white establishment's employment of massive resistance toward African American civil rights. Though financially aided from time to time by friends, fiduciary mishandling ultimately doomed her newspapers. While Smith had the good sense to cut back on her lifestyle once the boycott started, she continued to run newspapers that were not making money. She had a will of iron in fighting for her convictions, but she lacked discipline in regard to bringing her finances under control.

In 1982, Smith was 68 years old. At that age, most people are thinking of retirement and some measure of financial security, but Smith dreamed of remodeling her home, Hazelwood. She had always loved *Gone With the Wind* and its mythical southern mansion, Tara. She wanted to turn her modest home in Lexington into her personal version of the famed mansion. After the battles and abuse she endured, she may have felt this was owed to her. In reality, she refused to recognize her financial realities and created a recipe for total dissolution. Smith convinced her husband Walter to sell a piece of farmland they owned for \$155,000. According to biographer John Whalen, Walter

Smith wanted to use the money as a “nest egg for their retirement.” Without telling her husband, however, Smith used the money to pay for the restoration of the house. She also borrowed an additional \$100,000 from a bank in New Orleans. Obviously this upset Walter Smith, but his wife got her way. Her powerful presence, even at sixty-eight, was so great, that she got the bank to keep lending her money. William Ellis, Smith’s friend and banker, said that Smith “had this power of persuasion which anyone who knew her could attest to.” Ellis said that the Smith would waltz into the bank and announce that she needed “another \$10,000 to finish Hazelwood. Well, by golly, I loaned it to her.” By the time the house was completely remodeled in 1982, it had a winding staircase along with an elevator, a heated pool, and was stocked with antiques. She admitted in the 1970s that she already was over \$300,000 in debt. Her newspapers were not making money. She was well past her prime. How did she plan on keeping this house of cards standing?¹

The collapse started on November 20, 1982. Walter Smith fell off a ladder while cleaning the house’s gutters. He suffered a severe chest trauma and died before an ambulance could get him to the Holmes County Hospital. Walter and Hazel Brannon Smith were married for thirty-one years.²

After her husband’s death, Smith’s fortunes declined further. Friends started noticing that Smith began to act erratically and was experiencing memory loss. In 1984, Smith went to the University Mississippi to receive the Silver Em Award for journalism at the annual Mississippi Scholastic Press Association Institute. She gave a rambling

¹ John Whalen, *Maverick Under the Magnolias*, 295-296.

² Ibid., 299-300; See also “Pulitzer Prize winner Hazel Brannon near death” Jackson, Ms. *Clarion Ledger*, 7 May 1994.

speech that many listeners described as “mystifying.” Smith was beginning to suffer from the onset of Alzheimer’s disease.³

In the Spring of 1984, Cathy Trost, a reporter from the *Wall Street Journal*, visited Smith and wrote an article that revealed the diminished state of the once journalistic giant. Trost noted that Smith’s Pulitzer Prize certificate hung on a wall in her office, but the roof had a leak, and the certificate suffered water stains. When Trost pointed it out to Smith, Smith muttered, “Aw, what the hell?” and shoved the certificate into a drawer. The article contrasted Smith’s actions with how she was remembered in Holmes County. Howard Huggins, the first African American sheriff in the county, made it clear that Smith played a vital role in the 1960s. Huggins was born the son of a sharecropper and admitted,

If anyone had told me 20 years ago that I would have been sheriff, I wouldn’t have believed them. . . It was Miss Hazel’s major point that civil rights should be given to the black person. At that time, she was the only white person who had the guts to do that.⁴

On the other hand, many young people who were born during the conflict of the 1960s had no idea who Smith was. Trost’s article included quotes from Will Norton, a Journalism Professor at the University of Mississippi. One day in class he asked a young black female who was from Holmes County concerning Smith’s welfare. He only got a blank stare in return. Norton said, “It’s ironic how not just white but black students are almost completely unaware of the tensions that took place in this state.” When asked about her past career, Smith sounded almost dismissive, “It’s dead. It’s gone. I had a

³ John Whalen, *Maverick Under the Magnolias*, 302-304.

⁴ Cathy Trost, “Mississippi Editor Finds Crusade Different From the 60s: Hazel Brannon Smith, Voice For Black’s Civil Rights Fights for Paper’s Survival,” *Wall Street Journal*, 8 May 1984.

clear conscience, and I knew what I was doing was right. I just spoke the damn truth, that's all.” The end of her career contrasted dramatically with her hey day. Smith was nationally known and feted in the 1960s. She was broke, alone, and forgotten at home in the 1980s.⁵

By the fall of 1984, and into 1985, Smith's journalistic decline had reached its nadir. Smith no longer ran two separate newspapers; instead she simply interchanged the mastheads of the *Lexington Advertiser* and the *Durant News*. A perusal of the papers from this period shows a marked deterioration in the quality. Biographer John Whelan noted that at different times, the papers failed to come out which alarmed county officials and lawyers who depended on their announcements being reported in the county's officially designated paper.⁶

William Ellis, Smith's banker in Holmes County, informed her in the fall of 1984 that she owed over \$225,000 in two mortgages on her home, land, and office buildings to the Holmes County Bank as well as the Federal Land Bank of New Orleans. He urged her to sell much of her holdings if she wanted to have a chance of keeping her home and the surrounding land. Ellis received no reply.⁷

Smith was losing touch with reality. Jackson *Clarion Ledger* reporter Lee Freeland noted while Smith received notification she was about to lose her home and property, she continually denied she suffered from financial problems. She would not discuss the closing of the *Lexington Advertiser*. She stayed in her den while her house and property fell apart. Freeland noted that trees had fallen on the property and were left

⁵ Ibid., *Wall Street Journal*, 8 May 1984.

⁶ John Whalen, *Maverick Under the Magnolias*, 305.

⁷ Ibid., *Maverick Under the Magnolias*, 305.

unattended. The lavish remodeled home had no heat except where Smith stayed. The seventy-one year old woman was in a state of total dissolution; broke, alone, and increasingly bewildered.⁸

By 1985, Smith's creditors would not be denied. By July, the New Orleans bank foreclosed on Smith's home and all of her belongings. The last edition of the *Advertiser/News* came out in September. Smith issued no goodbye message to her dwindling number of readers. The papers just ceased to exist. Lee Freeland concluded,

Time has crumbled what 30 years of boycotts, violence, threats, and ostracism could not. The Lexington Advertiser is out of business, and editor Hazel Brannon Smith, a 50 year veteran of Mississippi journalism is a forgotten woman.⁹

With Smith growing more and more incapacitated, her Alabama family had to step in and take over. Bonnie Geer, Smith's younger sister, took her back to their birthplace of Gadsden, Alabama in January of 1986. When asked about Smith's career, Geer revealed hurt and bitterness over her sister's inglorious end and the fact that many of the county's residents either wanted to forget her career, or worse, were oblivious to what Smith had done. Geer said,

She could have retired many years ago had she not put up this fight. There are probably many people there in Lexington who are glorying in the fact that her property is going to be sold. And I'm sure there are many young black people in Mississippi and even in Holmes County who don't even recognize her name. Knowing what she has been through. I cannot help but feel hurt about that. That's the hardest thing.¹⁰

⁸ Lee Freeland, "Time Closes Lexington Newspaper that Battled Racism" *Jackson Clarion Ledger/ Jackson Daily News*, 5 January 1986.

⁹ John Whalen, *Maverick Under the Magnolias*, 305; Lee Freeland, *Jackson Clarion Ledger/ Jackson Daily News*, 5 January 1986.

¹⁰ *Ibid.*, 5 January 1986.

Smith's unceremonious departure from Mississippi may have gone unremarked by many white and black residents in Lexington, but the news of her personal and professional collapse brought deep sympathy from many black Mississippians across the state. Many had worked with Smith back in the 1960s, and they determined to not let Smith's past accomplishments fade away. The Jackson *Clarion Ledger* reported in January 1986 that a number of black elites in Jackson met to discuss the possibility of raising \$500,000 to aid Smith in her financial woes as well as to provide for her. The Jackson Links, an African American woman's professional service club, headed up the effort and sought help from other African American leaders. Rose McCoy, the former chairperson of the Department of Educational Psychology at Jackson State University, headed the effort and noted that many African Americans in the state felt they were in Smith's debt. McCoy said, "We felt she had made so many sacrifices on our behalf, we as a black community should express very tangible our recognition of what she did and our sympathy for her plight." Earnestine Lipscomb, a retired Librarian from Jackson State, echoed the same sentiments. She commented,

Some of us remember those days. She was a well-to-do woman. As a result of what she did for us...all of the anti-civil rights people went into action and killed her economically. A white woman in that day who would champion the rights of blacks was ostracized among white people. I feel that part of her plight now has come because of what she did for us. Helping her now is the least we could do.¹¹

This charitable effort fell far short of its lofty expectations. By November of 1987, the effort had only managed to raise \$5000. The money was sent to Bonnie Greer

¹¹ Jackson *Clarion Ledger*, "Blacks Establish Fund for Publisher," 31 January 1986.

in Gadsden, Alabama to help with her sister's needs. The fundraising attempt then shifted from direct aid to an attempt to raise money for the creation of a journalism scholarship in Smith's name. While the attempt did not pan out, it is important to note that African Americans who had taken part in the struggle in the 1950s and 1960s fondly thought of Smith as a considerable ally.¹²

Rose McCoy went the extra mile. She traveled to Hollywood and met with several film producers in order to convince them to make a film on Smith's life. McCoy wanted a movie that would tell Smith's story but also to provide her with compensation that would offset her debts. Several film companies indicated definite interest in the project, but Smith's sister Bonnie, who had power of attorney, turned all the offers down. Rose McCoy surmised that Bonnie Geer balked because she thought her sister's life and career "would not be presented in a favorable light." For whatever reasons, Smith's family derailed a possible film project that would have far surpassed the local fundraisers.¹³

Smith spent the last five years of her life in a nursing home in Cleveland, Tennessee. Smith's brother in law, John Geer, died of a heart attack in the fall of 1988, and her sister Bonnie Geer succumbed to a malignant brain tumor in June of 1989. Smith's niece, Mary Elizabeth Betancourt took over as the former editor's caregiver. Betancourt served as director of the Royal Care Nursing Home in Cleveland, Tennessee. She became Smith's legal guardian and moved her into the facility.¹⁴

¹² Jerry Dhonau, "Hazel B. Smith Not Forgotten" *Little Rock (Arkansas) Gazette*, reprint in *Greenwood (Mississippi) Commonwealth*, 12 November 1987.

¹³ John Whalen, *Maverick Under the Magnolias*, 316.

¹⁴ *Ibid.*, 319.

In 1994, actress Jayne Seymour and her husband James Keach produced a television movie on Smith's life, but the feature provided no compensation for Smith. Also, she was too incapacitated from Alzheimer's to even comprehend it. *A Passion for Justice: The Hazel Brannon Smith Story* aired on ABC in April of 1994, and received very mixed reviews from her friends and colleagues in Mississippi. Many noted that the movie incorporated a lot of fictitious events along with her Smith's real life experiences. For example, in the movie white Lexingtonians lynched a black man that worked for the editor. No such event ever occurred. The movie portrayed Smith's later years as happy ones, not acknowledging that she was indigent and mentally incapacitated. To make matters worse, Seymour's production company never consulted Mary Betancourt about the making of the movie. This outraged Smith's friend and colleague Bill Minor. Minor pointed out that with all the money spent on the making of the film, it was inconceivable that Smith received no compensation. He wrote, "More so, it is incredible that Hollywood is trading in big bucks on Hazel's life while she exists as a ward of the government."¹⁵

Minor would have the sad opportunity to speak on Smith's behalf at her funeral only a month later in May of 1994. Smith had been diagnosed with liver cancer in March and succumbed on May 14. Minor visited with Smith just before her death, but she did not recognize her old friend. Minor delivered the eulogy at her funeral. He noted that Smith had been "driven by a strong Christian conscience, a keen sense of justice and liberty and a compassion for the underdog that is the underdog of American journalism." He said Smith, "inevitably was drawn to oppose racial intolerance" which was an unpopular stand in the 1950s and 1960s and brought the ire and economic pressure from

¹⁵ Bill Minor, "TV Movie Cheats Heroic Journalist," Jackson *Clarion Ledger*, 24 April 1994.

the white establishment. He concluded, “If ever the martyrs to a free press in America are assembled in Heaven, there is one thing I know: Hazel Brannon Smith will be in the front rank.”¹⁶

* * * * *

By 2009, Mississippi had made great changes, and Hazel Brannon Smith had helped foster them. Whereas Senator T.M. Williams from Holmes County arose in the Mississippi state Senate in 1962 and branded Smith a traitor; in 2009, the Mississippi state legislature issued a joint resolution “recognizing the career and accomplishments” of the editor and “acknowledging her paramount contributions to the civil rights movement in the state of Mississippi.” Fittingly, Bryant Clark, the son of Robert Clark, served as one of the Representatives that authored the resolution. The senior Clark retired from the state House in 2003, and Bryant Clark ran and won his father’s seat. About the resolution, the younger Clark told a reporter, “This is long overdue recognition of a courageous woman and editor from my county.” The resolution recapped Smith’s career, noting her belief in segregation but being radicalized by the actions of the white establishment. The resolution praised Smith as “a remarkable individual . . . who was adamant in her personal beliefs and transformed by her convictions to advocate for change on behalf of those persecuted by the injustices of societal times and trends.” It concluded that Smith needed to be recognized for “her paramount contributions to the Civil Rights Movement in the state of Mississippi.”¹⁷

¹⁶ Bill Minor, *Eulogy for Hazel Brannon Smith*, quoted in Whalen, *Maverick Under the Magnolias*, 324-325. This writer also has a personal copy from Bill Minor.

¹⁷ “House Concurrent Resolution 83,” Mississippi Legislature, 2009, Accessed 3 May 2013, <http://billstatus.ls.state.ms.us/documents/2009/html/HC/HC0083IN.htm>; Bill Minor, “A ‘Traitor’

Throughout her journalism career, Smith avowed that she wanted to serve God and the community. In fifty years of editorials, she consistently sprinkled her columns and editorials with scripture passages and with biblical themes especially in regards to social justice and care for other human beings. Thus, it is only fitting to conclude with a biblical story that she would have known well. In the fourteenth chapter of the Gospel of Mark, the story is told of a woman who came to Jesus and anointed his feet with expensive oil. When his disciples rebuked her for such an ostentatious display, Jesus in turn admonished his disciples. He approved of her actions and said, “She did what she could.” In regards to her service to her community and state, the same could be said for Hazel Brannon Smith. Living in a time of seething racial hatred, she used her journalistic talents to promote social justice and freedom for all. While certainly not without flaws, she did what she could.¹⁸

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¹⁸ Mark 14:1-8, *New International Version*.

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