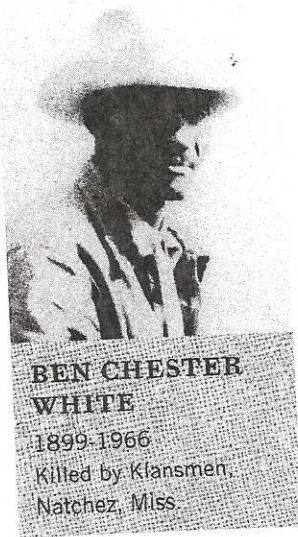


# generous friend



**BEN CHESTER WHITE**  
1899-1966  
Killed by Klansmen,  
Natchez, Miss

Ben Chester White had been a quiet, familiar presence on the Carter plantation in Natchez for as long as people could remember. The 67-year-old caretaker was a trusted worker and a generous friend. At a time when Mississippi was the center of civil rights turbulence, White was no threat. He never marched or demonstrated. He wasn't even registered to vote. He had no enemies, and there was no reason anyone would want to harm him.

Then a few members of the White Knights of the Ku Klux Klan, calling themselves the Cottonmouth Moccasin Gang, decided to kill a black man. It didn't matter much who they picked; the murder would simply be the lure for a bigger target — Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. At the time, King was leading a mass march through Mississippi to finish a protest begun by James Meredith, who had been wounded by sniper fire earlier in the march. Everywhere King went ugly crowds of angry white men met him. The Natchez Klansmen believed if they could draw King to Natchez, they could assassinate him and make themselves heroes among Klansmen.

The Klansmen decided Ben Chester White would be the lure. One of the Cottonmouth Moccasin Gang, James Jones, remembered gang leader Claude Fuller interrogating White about his views on integration. When Fuller asked, "Don't you feel your children should go to school with Whites?" the quiet caretaker nodded in agreement, simply to appease the Klansman. That was all the excuse Fuller needed. He told two

other gang members, "He's got to be got rid of."

On June 10, 1966, James Jones, Claude Fuller and Ernest Avants picked up White at his home, pretending they needed his help to find a lost dog. Jones drove to a secluded area where



they all got out of the car. Fuller aimed his rifle at White and began firing. He emptied one carbine pin and loaded another. This time he pointed the rifle at Avants, and ordered him to shoot into White's bullet-riddled body. Avants fired a shotgun blast that tore apart White's head. The men dumped the remains in a creek and burned the car.

### WHAT HAVE I DONE?

A month later, Jones confessed to the crime and was tried for murder. He told the jury he was "deep in sin" and wanted to clear his conscience. He repeated Ben Chester White's final cry: "Oh Lord, what have I done to deserve this?" Nevertheless, the jury could not reach a verdict, and Jones was never convicted. A separate jury acquitted Ernest Avants. Although Avants admit-

ted shooting White, he argued he could not be guilty of murder since he had fired into a dead body. Neither Avants nor Jones would agree to testify against Fuller, the man they both said killed White, and Fuller was never tried.

Ben Chester White's son Jesse could not stand to see the killers go unpunished. He filed a civil suit claiming that the Klansmen, under the orders of top White Knights leaders, conspired to violate the civil rights of his father. On November 13, 1968, federal Judge Harold Cox ruled against the Klan, and a jury awarded more than \$1 million in damages to White's family. It was the first time a Klan organization was found liable for violence committed by its members. Judge Cox said the award would "serve as a deterrent and message to others who may try to do similar acts."

The verdict gave consolation to another man — Edwin Benoit, the county attorney who had tried unsuccessfully to win murder convictions against the three Klansmen. Twenty-two years after White's death, Benoit still remembered the killing as "the most atrocious murder and the greatest occurrence of injustice" he had ever witnessed.

In 1999, it was discovered that White was murdered on federal property, giving the federal government the authority to reopen the case. Although James Jones and Claude Fuller had died, Ernest Avants was indicted on federal murder charges in 2000. In 2003, Avants was deemed competent to stand trial, was found guilty and sentenced to life in prison.