

# preaching the power of the vote



**THE REV.  
GEORGE LEE**

1903-1955

Killed for leading voter-registration drive, Belzoni, Miss.

**"Rev. Lee did not just tell the people what they ought to do. He gave them an example. He fought for equality and first-class citizenship, and he asked them to follow him."**

ROY WILKINS, NAACP EXECUTIVE DIRECTOR

In 1954, Blacks in Belzoni, Miss. outnumbered Whites 2-to-1. But like all Southern Blacks, they were not allowed to attend white schools. They were forbidden to eat in white restaurants. They would be arrested if they sat in bus seats reserved for Whites. And they did not vote.

Integration would be a long time coming to the small Delta town on the banks of the Yazoo River. The Rev. George Lee, a black minister who also ran a local grocery store and printing press, had no illusions that it would come in his lifetime or that it would come without a struggle.

But Lee knew where the change would have to begin: at the ballot box. Despite the Supreme Court's recent ruling that outlawed school segregation, Lee knew there would be no equality for Blacks in Belzoni until they could vote.

## FULL-FLEDGED CITIZENSHIP

George Lee was born and raised in poverty on a Mississippi plantation. His only education came from the segregated plantation school. By the time he came to Belzoni, he possessed two valuable skills — typesetting and preaching — and he planned to use both to help Blacks improve their lives.

When he began preaching about voting at black Baptist churches in and around Belzoni

in the early 1950s, it was as if he were advocating revolution. Not only were there no black voters in Humphreys County, but "they weren't even thinking about it," said Rosebud Lee Henson, Lee's widow.

It would be another 10 years before civil rights workers launched a massive campaign to win voting rights in Mississippi. Throughout the 1960s, they would suffer beatings and arrests. For a black man to raise his voice against discrimination in 1954 was an extreme risk. Lee knew that.

With the help of his friend Gus Courts, Lee started a chapter of the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People. They printed leaflets and held meetings, urging Blacks to pay the poll tax (a fee for voting that was later ruled illegal) and to register to vote.

Whites in town immediately organized a White Citizens Council to fight back. The names of Blacks registered to vote were put on a list and circulated to white businessmen who retaliated by firing them from their jobs, denying them credit and raising their rent.

In the face of white resistance, George Lee was a clever diplomat. At a meeting of county officials, Lee thanked the white leadership for its "generosity," and then gently suggested: "Whereas all the bordering counties are permitting

Negroes to pay poll taxes, register and vote without any ill effects, we feel sure that the same could happen in this county.... We respectfully ask that you will at this time endorse and support our efforts to become full-fledged citizens in this county."

## COULDN'T BE BOUGHT

The white men who ran Belzoni were not interested in giving the power of the ballot to a black population that outnumbered them and could easily out-vote them. They decided George Lee had to be stopped.

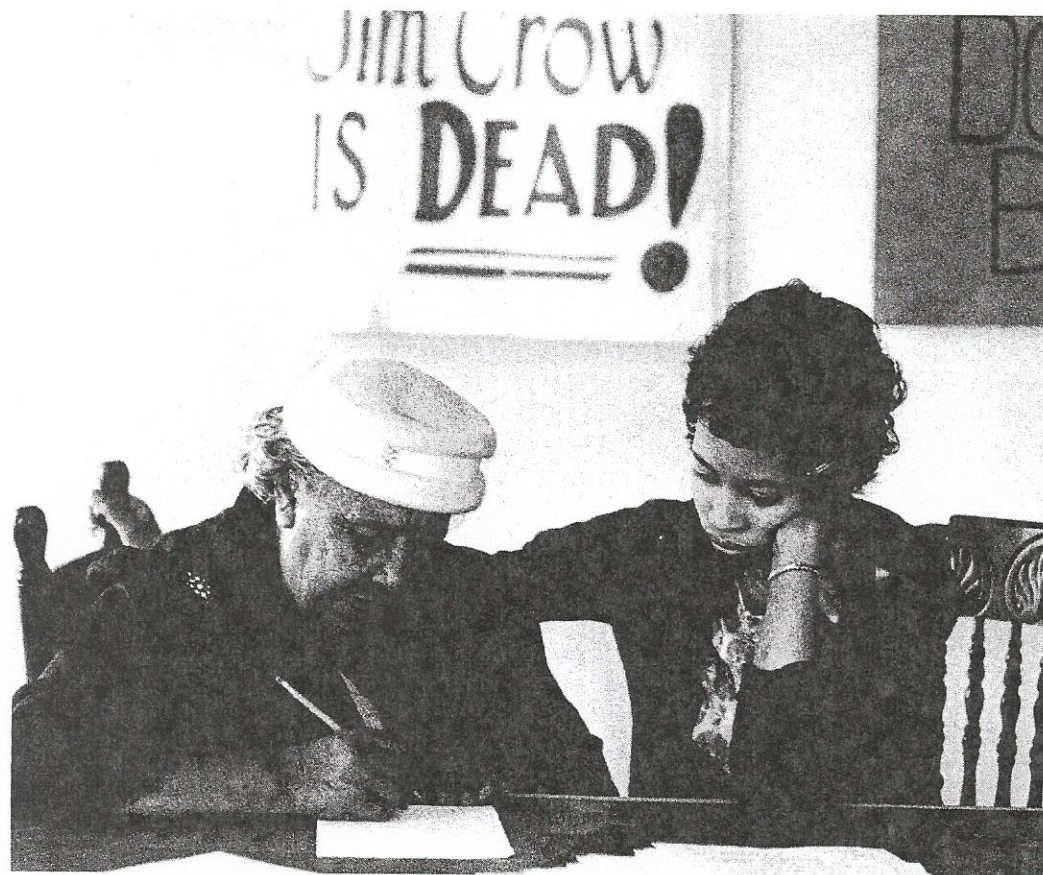
One day, a few of the white leaders came to visit Lee and told him they had decided to let him and his wife vote as long as he stopped trying to get other Blacks to vote. "George told them he appreciated that," his widow remembered, "but he wanted everyone to have a chance. And then they knew that he couldn't be bought."

Within a year, Lee and Courts convinced 92 black people to register. Then the white resistance turned violent. Blacks found their car windshields busted out. A black club was ransacked, and a note was left behind reading, "This is what will happen to Negroes who try to vote."

Lee and Courts regularly received death threats. Lee tried to take precautions, but he knew his days were numbered. Rose begged him to slow down his activities. But, she remembered, "He said somebody had to lead."

On the Saturday before Mother's Day in 1955, Lee was driving toward home when he was hit by gunfire from a





It took great courage for a black person to register to vote in Mississippi in the 1950s. Many were willing to risk their jobs, their homes and even their lives to exercise their constitutional rights.

passing car. With half his face blown apart, Lee pulled himself out of the car and made his way to a cabstand. Two black drivers took him to the hospital where he died.

### HE GAVE THEM AN EXAMPLE

Without conducting an investigation, the sheriff concluded that Lee was fatally injured in a traffic accident. When doctors pointed out the lead pellets taken from Lee's head and face, the sheriff said they were probably dental fillings. Even after he was informed that dentists didn't use lead for fillings, the sheriff refused to investigate. In the end, a coroner's jury ignored the evidence that Lee was murdered and ruled that he

died of unknown causes.

NAACP officials called Lee's murder the most brutal act in a campaign of terrorism against black people who tried to vote. A celebration of the first anniversary of the *Brown v. Board* decision was turned into a memorial service for Lee. NAACP Executive Director Roy Wilkins addressed the capacity crowd:

"Rev. Lee did not just tell the people what they ought to do. He gave them an example: He did these things himself. He fought for equality and first-class citizenship, and he asked them to follow him."

Wilkins urged Blacks to continue the struggle that Lee began in Belzoni. Many were so terrified by Lee's murder

that they removed their names from the voter rolls, but Gus Courts was determined not to back down. Then, six months after Lee's death, Courts was hit by shots from a passing car. He recovered from his injuries, but his assailants were never caught. Finally, yielding to the fears of his family, Courts abandoned his voter-registration efforts and moved to Chicago.

In 2000, FBI files were released that detailed the murder case against two suspects, Peck Ray and Joe David Watson Sr. The two were members in 1955 of the segregationist group known as the White Citizens Council, and both died in the 1970s. A local prosecutor refused to take the case to a grand jury, and it remains closed. ●