

# Unpopular, but Never Forgotten

Heidi Parra

## Faculty Introduction

Dr. Aaron Hyams

In this paper, Heidi Parra has made a wonderful, fresh contribution to new literature in civil rights history. She seeks to recenter the narrative on “every day people” in the civil rights struggle, shifting focus away from the leaders and limelight figures like Martin Luther King, Jr. and John Lewis. In this paper, Ms. Parra has brought together primary sources and a superb review of the secondary literature to provide fresh insights on the McGhee family of Greenwood, MS, and their contributions to the Black Freedom Struggle in Greenwood before and during the Freedom Summer of 1964. In line with recent trends in civil rights history, Ms. Parra demonstrates that the McGhees, like numerous other local civil rights leaders, often got involved because of their standing in the local community, which they felt impelled their position of leadership. Additionally, she stresses that this activism often came at extreme personal risk, due to the inability or unwillingness of federal law enforcement to guarantee rights and protections for activists in Mississippi and elsewhere.

## Abstract

Greenwood, Mississippi, took the forefront of the civil rights movement in 1964 with the Freedom Summer Project, in which volunteers sought to register a record number of African American voters. These volunteers were everyday people who risked their lives to protest segregation. Among these activists who fought tooth and nail, the McGhee family stood out as a family with engrained values. The family resided on a farm on the outskirts of Greenwood and was headed by the notable Laura McGhee. Laura used her middle-class position to participate in the fight for civil rights because her family could not rely on the federal government for protection. Today, much of the recognition for the achievements of the civil rights movement has been attributed to the federal government, while activists like the McGhees have been reduced to the role of supporting characters.

One of the most compelling sites of the American civil rights movement is the town of Greenwood, Mississippi. Having fostered the likes of Martin Luther King, Jr., Bob Moses, and Fannie Lou Hamer, Greenwood became the center of civil rights politics in the early 1960s. Behind these well-known activists, there lie another set of role models who participated in Greenwood and go unnoticed today. These Mississippian activists remain obscure in the civil rights movement, despite the number of accomplishments they achieved during their time. The McGhee family of Greenwood is a perfect example of a set of strong leaders that made outstanding progress for the cause, but often go unmentioned.

Similar to other activists in the Greenwood area, the McGhees were involved in the Student Nonviolent Coordinated Committee (SNCC). The SNCC was involved in various civil rights events such as the Freedom Rides of 1961, which challenged segregation on interstate buses. Although the campaign was not initiated by the SNCC, they took the reins after a White mob burned down the first bus in May of that year. The students did not want the rides to stop because that would indicate that violence was the key to stopping protests.<sup>1</sup> It is no surprise that the SNCC garnered a reputation for combating the violence of segregationists in midst of hesitant federal assistance.<sup>2</sup> The SNCC was

---

**The farm became well-known among the Black population, as did the name McGhee.**

---

reliable and provided protection for Laura McGhee and her six children of which Silas, Jake, and Clarence became the most

notable in the movement. Jake was the first of the family to get involved with the SNCC. From then on, the McGhees gradually increased their involvement with the organization. They owned a farm on the outskirts of Greenwood that was used to host meetings. The farm became well-known among the Black population, as did the name McGhee. Their involvement went as far as to attract the attention of the federal government. How a small family like the McGhees were able to make a significant impact can be explained: the McGhees were a middle-class

---

<sup>1</sup> Charles M Payne, *I've Got the Light of Freedom: The Organizing Tradition and the Mississippi Freedom Struggle* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2007), 87.

<sup>2</sup> Francis Shor, "Utopian Aspirations in the Black Freedom Movement: The SNCC and the Struggle for Civil Rights, 1960–1965," *Utopian Studies* 15, no. 2 (2004): 177, <https://www.jstor.org/stable/20718673>.

family that felt obliged to use their position to lead in the Mississippi civil rights movement because the federal government was unreliable.

It was not an easy task to ethically transform the state of Mississippi. Mississippian resident Anthony Harris says, “they taught young kids like myself how to play the role of that second-class citizen.”<sup>3</sup> It was uncommon to stand up against racial injustice before the 1960s, especially in the state of Mississippi. Many forms of intimidation were normalized in the southern state. However, those acts of intimidation were just challenges for people like the McGhees who sought to demonstrate how far their community was willing to go against segregation.

Gus Courts, Laura McGhee’s brother, was the first relative of the family to get directly involved with the civil rights movement as the president of the local branch of the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP) in Belzoni, Mississippi. He maintained his position until the local bank president threatened his credit rating if he did not resign.<sup>4</sup> The bank president was a participant of the Citizens Council, a national White supremacist group whose goal was to maintain the system of segregation in the South. Courts resigned but continued to work in the efforts of Black voter registration. In 1955, after the killing of his friend George Lee, there were rumors that Gus Courts was the next person to be targeted. Courts worked as a grocer and during one of his shifts, he was shot. No arrests were made after the incident. When Courts recovered, he made it his mission to leave the state. He relocated to Chicago where he was able to get another job with the help of the NAACP.<sup>5</sup>

Laura and Gus had been raised by their fearless father who stood up for himself several times while working at a plantation where he was the only Black worker to get paid cash. Author Charles Payne wrote, “he stood up for himself and would go after a White man as quick as he would a Black one.”<sup>6</sup> After living with her father, Laura met her husband who was also an independent man who remained distrustful of White people in business deals. Her husband worked extremely hard, from

---

<sup>3</sup> *Freedom Summer*. Directed by Stanley Nelson. PBS, 2014, 10:29.

<sup>4</sup> John Dittmer, *Local People: The Struggle for Civil Rights in Mississippi* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1995), 53.

<sup>5</sup> Dittmer, 54.

<sup>6</sup> Charles M. Payne, *I’ve Got the Light of Freedom*, 153.

sunrise to sundown, to transform the land he owned into a fertile farm that grew cotton and corn.<sup>7</sup> Unfortunately, he passed away from a heart attack when his youngest son, Silas, was just seven years old. He left Laura and their six children the farm, which was a rare possession for a Black family to own at the time. Instead of maintaining a low profile, Laura McGhee continued to uplift the legacy that was left behind by the men in her life.

In Greenwood, Mississippi, injustice was prevalent, and difficult for Laura to ignore. More than 90% of recipients that participated in the annual winter distribution program were Black.<sup>8</sup> In July 1962, Leflore County voted to discontinue this voluntary program. This program had been kept alive to profit local farmers, but as agriculture became more modernized, the county saw no need in accepting federal funds for said program. The county disregarded the 22,000 people that benefitted from the surplus commodities, most of whom were Black. It was an attack on the Black community: Black people were looked down upon for borrowing resources and were often accused of mishandling their welfare cards. The shutdown of the winter program is one of several examples that demonstrate the lack of empathy officials in Leflore County had for Black families.

Black Americans made up at least half and sometimes 70-80% of agricultural workers in areas throughout the United States.<sup>9</sup> Meanwhile, the McGhees had the privilege of owning their own farm. Their small farm on the outskirts of Greenwood served as an economic resource that placed the McGhees at an advantage compared to their fellow Black Mississippians. Laura was self-aware, so she used her economic advantage to secure bail bonds for protesting workers. At one point, she had helped so many people get out on bail that she was barred from doing so in the future.<sup>10</sup> Laura McGhee quickly became a local movement leader that the SNCC and Council of Federated Organizations staffers could look up to.

---

<sup>7</sup> Eric Moskowitz, "They Heard the Call of Freedom, a Summons That Still Haunts," *Boston Globe*, Aug. 30, 2014, <https://www.bostonglobe.com/metro/2014/08/30/freedom/GWBWN0guTCFsjhI8Lgj5jP/story.html>.

<sup>8</sup> Dittmer, *Local People*, 144.

<sup>9</sup> *Freedom Summer*, 0:11:39.

<sup>10</sup> Payne, *I've Got the Light of Freedom*, 149.

Like all other activists, Laura had to decide between handling the civil rights movement in a violent or nonviolent approach. Generally, she adhered to a philosophy of nonviolence.<sup>11</sup> However, she developed a history of assaulting police officers, which put her life at great risk. On April 3rd, 1963, police confronted a group of 40 Black demonstrators that were making their way to the local courthouse, Laura among them.<sup>12</sup> The group was told to disperse, and those who refused were arrested. Chaos ensued, and a police officer threatened Laura with his nightstick. She proceeded to yank the nightstick out of his hand and held onto the officer until activist Dick Gregory had to get her off him.

She also hit a police officer in the face when she was refused a visit with her son Jake while he was in jail. The officer had blocked her way, so she pummeled him and swept by. The SNCC field worker Bob Zellner commented, “a new day is coming when a Black woman can just whip the yard-dog shit out of a White cop and not have to account for it.”<sup>13</sup> Laura escaped charges because the police chief realized it was not favorable for the story to be released in the midst of intense race relations. The civil rights movement in coalition with the Freedom Summer campaign was in full swing at the time. Therefore, an increase in national publicity would have further tarnished the reputation of the Greenwood police force. This caused many activists to be saved from further acts of violence committed by law enforcement.

While Laura continued her involvement in activism, her sons Silas, Jake, and Clarence became known for their frequent visits to all-White movie theaters in which they sought to test the efficiency of the Civil Rights Act of 1964. Author Joseph Luders explains, “the enactment of the Civil Rights Act of 1964 furnished activists with new weapons to impose greater costs upon noncompliant enterprises, but resistance continued.”<sup>14</sup> It was Silas’ idea to test the integration of movie theaters since he believed the act of 1964 was a sham that guaranteed the already

---

<sup>11</sup> A. O. Umoja, “1964: The Beginning of the End of Nonviolence in the Mississippi Freedom Movement,” *Radical History Review*, no. 85 (2003): 221, <https://muse.jhu.edu/article/37741/summary>.

<sup>12</sup> Dittmer, *Local People*, 154.

<sup>13</sup> Shor, “Utopian Aspirations in the Black Freedom Movement,” 180.

<sup>14</sup> Joseph Luders, “The Economics of Movement Success: Business Responses to Civil Rights Mobilization,” *American Journal of Sociology* 111, no. 4 (2006): 988, <https://www.jstor.org/stable/10.1086/498632>.

established rights under the Constitution and the Bill of Rights.<sup>15</sup> The Leflore Theatre became a frequent target once the trips started. At first, Silas was not involved with the SNCC, so these trips were not part of the Freedom Summer Campaign that was occurring at the time. He would go on these trips by himself because he felt morally obliged to do so. Jake and Clarence joined him down the line. Their frequent defiance tested the violence of the White population of Greenwood.

Such violence culminated when Silas was shot shortly after waking up from taking a nap in his car.<sup>16</sup> He was shot in the head and the bullet went into his throat. When he was taken to the hospital, no one made an effort to help him. While he laid on the stretcher, White doctors passed him and ignored him. Eventually a Black doctor showed up and started the treatment that miraculously saved Silas from death.

A near-death experience coupled with other life-threatening situations were notable components of the McGhee family history, so why would they choose to make such sacrifices? They could have stopped their activism when threats were made to the family's farm or when Silas was shot, but they continued to fight alongside the SNCC. Lawrence Guyot, SNCC field secretary and director of the Mississippi Freedom Democratic Party, once stated that activists must ethically transcend themselves to make judgements.<sup>17</sup> The relentless drive of the McGhees exceeded societal expectations, which drew the attention of Black Greenwood residents. The message behind their actions encouraged folks to see that the old order was passing.<sup>18</sup> Their participation in the civil rights movement was an indication that White violence was coming to an end.

Not many Mississippians could make such judgements toward the discrimination system because to some people, the risk of losing a loved one was far greater than defying norms. It was typical for Black Mississippians to steer away from politics in an effort to avoid intimidation from law enforcement and their White neighbors. The McGhees stood up against that normality because they could. They

---

<sup>15</sup> Payne, *I've Got the Light of Freedom*, 150.

<sup>16</sup> Payne, 151.

<sup>17</sup> Lawrence Guyot, interview by Julian Bond, *Smithsonian Institute's National Museum of African American History & Culture* (2010): 01:01:43.

<sup>18</sup> Payne, *I've Got the Light of Freedom*, 154.

were a middle-class Black family who used the resources they had to help their community. They were well aware of the life-threatening risks, but they chose to remain activists. At the end of the day, someone had to risk their life and family to help the cause. The options of the Black community were either to die at the hands of an unethical system or to die as a fighter, and the McGhees chose the latter.

As previously mentioned, the McGhees became a part of the biggest campaign of the civil rights movement in Greenwood. Freedom Summer was a political campaign that was created to combat White supremacy in the local courthouse, education system, and the federal system. It had always been a challenge to allow Black people to participate in elections since the courthouse was set like a legal fortress. Many people would get turned around and told to go home. Those who resisted would get beaten up by mobs. Threats were made that usually consisted of one losing their job or life. Those who did make it inside their courthouse would have to confront literacy tests and interpret sections of the Constitution. The registrar had full control of who was accepted or denied the right to vote.<sup>19</sup> Efforts were made to combat this intimidation, such as in the case of the 1963 gubernatorial election where campaign headquarters distributed 25,000 mail-in ballots.<sup>20</sup> These anonymous ballots decreased the chances of repercussions.

By the fall of 1964, White supremacy was losing the stronghold it once had. Lynchings had declined as the result of an increase in activism that pushed the federal government to take action. When the FBI would peek its head into the town of Greenwood, White aggressors would be more cautious when executing their discriminatory attacks. This caused a rise in hate crimes at night, many of which were drive-by shootings and bombings; whereas earlier in the century, newspapers would announce the lynchings of Black men ahead of time.<sup>21</sup> Bombings and drive-by shootings were part of a tactical readjustment that resulted in fewer deaths. The new terrorizing methods were undoubtedly less effective.<sup>22</sup> Besides the activism that put pressure on the federal government, the other reason why White supremacists became less outspoken was

---

<sup>19</sup> *Freedom Summer*, 0:19:58.

<sup>20</sup> Dittmer, *Local People*, 205.

<sup>21</sup> Payne, *I've Got the Light of Freedom*, 28.

<sup>22</sup> Payne, 144.

because of gun usage. The McGhees survived various attacks, but some were prevented because of the right to bear arms. Sam Block, fellow member of the SNCC, once said that Laura McGhee was known for preventing attacks on her home by carrying arms.<sup>23</sup> Although Laura did follow a philosophy of non-violence, when the McGhee home was repeatedly shot at and firebombed, it seemed reasonable to participate in the longstanding tradition of self-defense. It was reported that after one of these attacks towards her property, Mrs. McGhee called the sheriff's office and told them she knew exactly who the shooters were and if the sheriffs refused to do anything about it, they would be picking up bodies next time she called.<sup>24</sup> When the farmhouse was eventually burned down, there was a lot of speculation. It seemed as though one of the violent attacks by White aggressors finally proved to be successful enough to destroy the home. However, evidence has pointed towards the fire being an accident.<sup>25</sup> Either way, White aggressors were commonly armed, so Black Mississippians had to match the aggressiveness of the White population. Mississippians eventually became more familiar with self-defense than the nonviolence movement.

The continuous efforts put forward by the McGhee family are what turned them into local heroes of the civil rights movement. Their story might not be popular among the general discussion of the civil rights era, but their story lives on in the Greenwood area. Today, much of the federal action is overstated when discussing civil rights. Civil rights activists of the time believed the federal government felt too distant to the cause.<sup>26</sup> The government did play a role in the movement, but it maintained its role as minimal as possible. One can see this when analyzing the trips the McGhee brothers took to the Leflore movie theater. The brothers were often belittled and threatened during these trips even though the Civil Rights Act of 1964 had already been put into effect. Another instance of discrimination took place on February 16, 1965, when Milton Hancock, Reverend L. Given, and Jake McGhee were refused entrance to the Ervin Hotel in Greenwood.<sup>27</sup> This happening

---

<sup>23</sup> Umoja, "1964," 206.

<sup>24</sup> Maurice N. Richter, *In Struggle: The SNCC and the Black Awakening of the 1960s* (Cambridge; London: Harvard University Press, 1982), 122.

<sup>25</sup> Payne, *I've Got the Light of Freedom*, 154.

<sup>26</sup> Emilye Crosby, "I Just Had a Fire!": An Interview with Dorie Ann Ladner," *Southern Quarterly* 52, no. 1 (2014): 80.

<sup>27</sup> "Mississippi News Roundup," *Student Voice*, March 5, 1965, Readex AllSearch.

seven months after the passing of the Civil Rights Act and the Freedom Summer Campaign was very telling of the committed efforts to sustain segregation despite the presence of federal legislation. The passage of the Civil Rights Act of 1964 shows that the federal government was willing to pass legislature on the discrimination issue but was not as willing to provide the necessary enforcement.

The incident on April 3, 1963, in which Laura McGhee grabbed a policeman's nightstick, but was pulled aside by activist Dick Gregory, also reflects the relationship between activists and the federal government. There is more to this moment than McGhee standing up to a police officer. There is the fact that local police were blatantly going against federal orders in plain sight of the FBI. Previously to this incident, the Justice Department had asked Greenwood city officials to "permit

Negros to exercise their constitutional right to assemble for peaceful protest demonstrations and protect them from Whites who might object."<sup>28</sup> This was in

**...local police were blatantly going against federal orders in plain sight of the FBI.**

response to the eight Black demonstrators that remained in prison at the time. The Kennedy Administration had also filed a lawsuit against the city of Greenwood on March 30 of 1963 for mistreating its citizens during voting registration efforts.<sup>29</sup> It is worth noting that before this lawsuit was filed, it took a lot of pressure from the SNCC to make the federal government pay attention to the confrontations between activists and White Mississippians. Kennedy had refused to propose civil rights legislation and it was frustrating seeing the federal government take their time on an issue of constitutional violations.

The FBI had taken a stance of not physically intervening in instances of racial discrimination. During one of their trips to the Leflore theater in July 1964, Silas, Jake, and Clarence were attacked by a White mob waiting for them outside the establishment. Jake's eye was injured when one of the protestors launched a bottle through the rear window of their car. When they got to the hospital, they were still being pursued by the mob. Activist Bob Zellner called the FBI and the response he got from attorney John Doar of Justice Department was, "you have to make your own decisions in these matters" signaling that it was

<sup>28</sup> Dittmer, *Local People*, 153

<sup>29</sup> Dittmer, 153.

irresponsible for the McGhee boys to have gotten themselves in that situation.<sup>30</sup> The FBI, police, and sheriff's department showed up, but made no effort in protecting the members of the SNCC. The boys and the rest of the members of the SNCC did not leave the hospital until one in the morning, when the sheriff changed his mind and decided to escort them out. This long stalemate could have ended sooner if the federal government had an iron fist in enforcing the Civil Rights Act that was passed that same month. Federal action meant little for the lives of Black Mississippians.

Today, there is not much discussion about the pressure and effort that led to the passing and enforcement of the Civil Rights Act or how that act did not change circumstances in small towns like Greenwood. Laura and her boys provide a solid insight of how the average civil rights activist was ignored and not protected by the government. They took matters into their own hands because they felt distant from the federal government like many others.

The McGhees contributed to the civil rights cause in their own ways. Silas' attempts to integrate the Leflore theater eventually led to the arrest of three White men in July of 1964. According to an excerpt from the *Student Voice* newspaper published by the SNCC, this incident became one of the first arrests under the Civil Rights Act of 1964.<sup>31</sup> The arrest of White aggressors was a milestone for the civil rights movement because it gave hope for the elimination of White violence and a sense of safety for the Black community. Such milestones were not achieved overnight, but instead it took years to see change. The Black community had to continue testing the efficiency of the Civil Rights Act.

Meanwhile, the McGhees continued to use their farm to host events sponsored by the SNCC. A young Bob Dylan once got the opportunity to perform at the farm as part of a festival put together by the committee. A *New York Times* journalist wrote, "the festival was attended by 250 to 300 persons. Most of them were Negroes. There were a score or more of young White people, plus several White newsmen and a television camera crew of four White men from New York."<sup>32</sup> The event was

---

<sup>30</sup> Dittmer, 278.

<sup>31</sup> "News Roundup," *Student Voice*, July 29, 1964.

<sup>32</sup> "Northern Folk Singers Help out at Negro Festival in Mississippi," *New York Times*, July 7, 1963.

massive, considering the location was on the outskirts of a small town. The Black community had the opportunity this day to rejoice in a hootenanny, an event composed of folk music where people can gather and dance or sing along. It is events like these that united the people of Greenwood for a common cause. They found joy in music and sang freedom songs when protesting in the streets or even while being detained in jail. Music was an out for Black Mississippians. This festival, hosted by the McGhees and attended by around 300 people, was a bold statement declaring how confident the Black community had become in achieving their rights. The McGhees put themselves at risk and used what was available to them to achieve progress.

All things considered, the McGhees stood in a middle-class position that was uncommon for the typical Black Mississippian; therefore, they felt it was their responsibility to lead in the local civil rights movement and protest the inactivity of the federal government. This was how the small McGhee family was able to leave a footprint behind in the history of the Mississippi civil rights movement. Their determination went as far as to catch the attention of the federal government. However, people like the McGhees nowadays go unmentioned when discussing this period in history. It is important to remain aware of the Black activists who fueled the movement and do not get as much recognition as the likes of Martin Luther King, Jr. or Rosa Parks. Nevertheless, the McGhee family remain local heroes of Greenwood in memory. Although their home is gone, the site remains in people's memories as it once allowed the congregation of Black citizens searching for help. The legacy of the McGhees may be unpopular, but never forgotten. ■

## Student Biography

Heidi Parra graduated with a Bachelor of Arts in History with a minor in Criminal Justice from Sam Houston State University in spring 2024. During her time at SHSU, she was involved in various organizations such as Lambda Alpha Epsilon and the Banned Books Club. When she was tasked with completing an extensive research project for her history senior seminar, Heidi knew she wanted to get involved with biographical research. She used this opportunity to research overlooked historical figures, and stumbled upon the McGhee family who contributed to Freedom Summer in 1964 as part of the civil rights movement in Mississippi. Heidi crafted her paper with the help of Dr. Aaron Hyams. Heidi plans to earn a Master's in Library Science from Texas Woman's University.