

Nieman Reports: Nieman Foundation for Journalism at Harvard

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To Be a 'Negro' Newsman—Reporting on the Emmett Till Murder Trial

By Simeon Booker

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Simeon Booker, center, covers the Emmett Till murder trial for Jet magazine. He is seated in the Negro press section with, from left, Clotye Murdock of Ebony magazine, L. Alex Wilson of The (Memphis, Tenn.) Tri-State Defender, and Steve Duncan of The St. Louis Argus.

In 1956, Nieman Reports published Simeon Booker's account of his Jet magazine coverage of the Emmett Till trial:

Millions of words were written about the recent Till murder trial, but the most dramatic and, by far, the most significant development during the hectic week in the backwoods Mississippi community remains untold. It was an incredible interracial manhunt which located three key Negro witnesses whose testimony almost changed the course of the trial. It involved the unique cooperation of Negro and white reporters, top Negro leaders, and Mississippi law enforcers working together in a hard-hitting team at a time most of the U.S. thought the Dixie state was doing nothing about gaining convictions in the case.

When I came away from the trial, I was somewhat downhearted by the acquittal verdict, but I was not embittered. I was proud of the law enforcers. I personally knew they had done what they could to produce the murder evidence. As a party to this manhunt which even I as a Chicago newsman would describe as unbelievable had gained great respect for three white Southern newsmen, Clark Porteous of the Memphis Press-Scimitar and W. C. Shoemaker and Jim Featherstone of the Jackson Daily News. Porteous, a former Nieman Fellow, served as the main liaison agent for the operation and he did so unflinchingly in an atmosphere which was charged with tension and fear.

For the group of 12 Negro newsmen who covered the trial, it was a bitter, at times frustrating experience. As soon as we arrived in Sumner, Sheriff H. C. Strider laid down the law there was to be no mixing with white reporter sand any violation meant ejection

from the courtroom and town. The day before the trial opened, our Jet-Ebony crew ran into a truckload of gun-bearing whites on a truck near Money, Mississippi, which brought it home to us that our assignment was no good neighbor get-together. The Sheriff's edict further restricted our movement. As a result, we stayed to ourselves in the far corner of the courtroom as the antagonistic Exhibit A of Northern Negro reporters who were capitalizing on low-rating the South.

On the first night of the trial, we had a pleasant surprise. Two white reporters (I better not mention names) defied the state's segregation laws to breeze into our town for a visit. They gave us the first report that the trial was "a fix," that the state had obtained only two witnesses (Rev. Mose Wright and his 12-year-old son, Simeon), both of whom were at the house when Till was kidnapped. Said our guests: "The trial won't last two days. The State doesn't even know where this boy was killed. They have no murder weapon. They have hardly circumstantial evidence of a killing."

The white reporters also gave us some tips on conduct in the courtroom. Said they: "Take it easy. Don't get excited. They're waiting for just one incident so they can pitch out all of you."

After the pair left, we got a spine-tingling phone call from Dr. T.R.M. Howard, Mound Bayou surgeon and perhaps Mississippi's foremost Negro civil rights leader. His information: Two Negro workers had vanished on a Milam-owned plantation. One was reported to have knowledge of the crime. What it was no one knew.

The next day we heard reports that other Negroes were being "jailed" or whisked away from area plantations. Why this sudden exit we still didn't know, but we had ideas. But it was not only difficult, it was dangerous to try to track down some of the stories, the section being so hostile to intruders. We continued attending the trial and awaiting further word from Dr. Howard.

Finally, on the day that the state presented its first witness, aging Rev. Mose Wright, things began to happen. A Negro plantation worker, on the pretense of going to church, made his way to Dr. Howard and told him a hair-raising account. He knew of the whereabouts of a group of Negroes who not only had seen Till being carried on a truck into a barn, but later had heard someone beaten and cry for mercy.

Immediately, Dr. Howard met with the Negro reporters and NAACP officials to plot a course of action. This was the hottest story of the trial. It would give the state just the evidence it needed. But there were major problems. There was a vast wall between the races. There were the barriers of mistrust and lack of confidence. One group argued that in the event we continued to withhold this valuable information we would be obstructing justice. But others contended that hasty action would be dangerous. There were lives at stake. In any event, the Negroes had to be taken away from their homes for their safety.

After working out plans to evacuate these potential witnesses, we agreed to call in the most reliable and sympathetic daily paper reporters covering the trial. In return for sharing this headline story, the white reporters would be asked to make the first contact with the law enforcers and prosecution. They would notify them of the new evidence. As our part of the bargain, we would then produce the witnesses.

On our original list of newsmen to be summoned were several topnotch reporters covering the trial. But Dr. Howard refused to accept the full list. He had confidence in one man Clark Porteous, a fair and square Southerner. When he called Porteous, however, Dr. Howard didn't make this clear and Porteous (probably for company) brought along two Jackson Daily News reporters, James Featherstone and W. C. Shoemaker. Thus, these newsmen became the only whites who actually knew of the behind-the-scenes activity, and since they were involved they modestly have refrained from disclosing their roles in later stories.

At the initial meeting, Dr. Howard, in his excitement at the turn of events, forgot to tell the white delegation that his uncovering of the "surprise witnesses" was to be kept secret until they were brought from the plantation. When notified of this, Featherstone balked and stated that he would run the story the next day. Porteous intervened and finally got Featherstone to hold up the story on condition that no other reporter would be tipped off. We agreed on these terms: The whites would have the law enforcers in the town at eight o'clock the next evening when we would produce the witnesses.

The tight ring of reporters also included Jimmy Hicks of the Afro-American, Clotye Murdock and David Jackson of the Jet-Ebony team, and L. Alex Wilson of the Defender.

While excitement increased, we could hardly believe the true impact of our project until Judge Curtis Swango the next day allowed the state to delay its case for a half day. The reason: to find our new witnesses.

But our well laid plans for the eight p.m. meeting didn't work out. The sheriffs of two counties showed up but not the witnesses. We discovered that "some white men" had visited the plantations in question in the morning and by the time our party reached there, the witnesses had vanished, frightened to death. Later, we learned that the visitors were law enforcers who somehow had been given advance information and had probably become restless. So we had new problem sand only some 12 hours to locate our

people.

Sheriff George Smith of Leflore County, fair man that he is, promptly routed the pessimism. Said he: "These witnesses have a story to tell. We've got to find them if it takes all night. We'll stop court until we find them."

Some of the law enforcers got on the phone and began calling up plantation owners warning them to produce such witnesses or face legal action.

In this manner, Mississippi's first major interracial manhunt began. Each sheriff agreed to take a Negro and go to a plantation home. All would be visited before morning. The Negro escort would plead with the potential witnesses to testify. There would be no warrants issued. No one would be carted out of his home. We agreed to round up our people and bring them to the State Enforcement Agent's office in Drew.

Three of us (Porteous, Featherstone and myself) followed Sheriff Smith in a 70-mile-an-hour chase along dusty backwoods roads to get 18-year-old Willie Reed. This youth had actually seen Till on the truck and heard the beating. During the run, we got lost and headed back to Drew, where in about a half-hour business began to pick up.

The first Negro rounded up was middle-aged Frank Young. He refused to talk to anyone except Dr. Howard, who hadn't yet arrived at the office. So Young was allowed to go home to be summoned on call. An hour later, when sheriffs went after him again, he was missing. He didn't turn up at his plantation home until two days after the trial.

Throughout the night, the search continued. Each person was brought in and asked to testify. All were frightened. Finally, Dr. Howard promised to take each of those who would testify to live in Chicago. This worked with three witnesses Willie and his 74-year-old grandfather and Mandy Bradley, who later was forced to leave her cabin in the dead of night to get away from the plantation.

When the court opened in the morning, the new witnesses were on hand. Newspapers blared the story of the new witnesses the fact that these people could give an account of seeing Till go into the barn and hearing the outcries; evidence which strengthened the state's case. But none mentioned the all-night manhunt.

Later, special prosecutor Robert Smith praised the work of the reporters in gathering the new witnesses, one of whom, Willie Reed, became the trial's star witness. But the reporter whose calmness and keen judgment was responsible for the smoothness of the operation was Clark Porteous. He was the reporter Mississippi's Negro leaders had faith in because of his outstanding work in the section, and he proved it again at the Till murder trial.

Simeon Booker, a 1951 Nieman Fellow, is on the staff of Jet Magazine.



* * * * *

Booker Recalls South High Days, YSU and 'Doc' Ward

"I'm still proud of Youngstown," says Simeon Booker. "It still has a special place for me. That's where I first started and really got myself together."

Booker admitted that his Washington office is "a long way," from his hometown, where he cut his journalistic teeth as a sports editor for the *Buckeye Review* during his days at South High School.

In a phone interview from his office at Johnson Publications, Booker asked if the YMCA on W. Federal Street was still standing. He explained he had fond memories of the building, now the site of the Rescue Mission. His family lived in the top floor of the building in the 30s.

His father, the late Simeon S. Booker Sr., served

as the YMCA executive secretary 35 years. His mother had run the Y's cafeteria. After his retirement, the elder Booker became pastor of Third Baptist Church.

While he attended Youngstown State University he promoted Negro League baseball games at Idora Park and other city fields. Booker recalled that the late Frank "Doc" Ward, longtime *Vindicator* sports editor, provided ample space and advice as well to the fledgling journalist.

Booker went on to graduate from Virginia Union

University. He was awarded a prestigious Nieman Fellowship at Harvard University in 1950.

"I still have deep sentiments for Youngstown," said Booker, who noted that he still receives letters from Youngstownians.

He said he passed through Youngstown three years ago on his way to spend Christmas at his in-laws in Akron. His last formal visit came in 1974, when he spoke at the Youngstown Sickle Cell Anemia Foundation dinner.

While he has no concrete plans to visit Youngstown in the immediate future, he noted that he would be "happy to come back."

Simeon Booker Attracts Attention as One of Capital's Top Newsmen

By JACQUELINE TRESMOTT
1982, The Washington Post

WASHINGTON — Simeon Booker, the Washington bureau chief for Ebony and Jet magazines, hunches over his typewriter, mulling over what he's learned at lunch with Vice President George Bush.

He talks about Bush and their conversation on the ride to Booker's office, a block from Bush's.

"He's a very shrewd man, and I tell him, man, he's about all we've got and I'm not about to get him messed up [by writing too many good things about him]," says Booker.

"He said he went to Moscow for the funeral of Brezhnev, and got more publicity on that than his trip to Africa. He said, 'That's tragic,' and I said, 'Well, that's interesting, but that's not a story for me.'"

Booker talks on. But what he doesn't bring up is that he was the only black reporter at that lunch of columnists and bureau chiefs, a commentary on the pace of racial progress in the media during his three decades in the business.

Last week Booker, a 64-year-old Youngstown native, received the Fourth Estate Award of the National Press Club, the first black to receive this honor. The behind-the-scenes talk is that the nominating process was anything but harmonious, but the committee's vote finally was unanimous.

Booker thinks most

awards are meaningless. "But this is a legitimate award. You know in our community everyone gives you an award, they can't give you an honorarium, so they say, 'Give you an award, come over.' I say the hell with all that," he growls.

"I've never been excited about notoriety. I get the news, go home, have a drink and forget it."

After 27 years in Washington, Booker is a mini-institution. The second black reporter to win a Nieman Fellowship at Harvard, he became The Washington Post's first full-time black reporter in 1952.

His coverage of the murder of Emmett Till, a young black who allegedly whistled at a white woman in Mississippi, in Jet during 1955 is credited with mobilizing support of the Southern civil rights movement.

His column is the only weekly news-gossip column about black politicians and professionals, and he has a special personality, all the rough edges of the old-fashioned movie reporter and the charm of a Runyonesque character.

His office is an-office-



Simeon Booker

away-from-the-office for a lot of black Washington bureaucrats, who periodically stop by for some scotch, some often raucous talk and, occasionally, a fast poker game.

In his office, Booker is never still. Tall and husky, he moves rapidly.

His thick hair is almost white, and his plain shirts are brightened with bow ties. He turns down his hearing aid if he doesn't want to be bothered.

His voice, a rumble like a vacuum cleaner, reverberates through the office. As he talks, he never finishes what he starts, and that's the style of his column, always punchy, leaving the end dangling.

"If you check things out, people learn what you are working on. If you make things too accurate, people will figure out where you got them," says Booker, who is sometimes criticized for his journalistic techniques.

"Then, a lot of times you put things in, sometimes deliberately to get a stream of thought going on things. . . . If the facts are wrong, that's not the important thing, but is there some element of truth in it."

Booker doesn't exactly remember why reporting has been second nature to him since high school and college. "I was the only one who worked my way through Virginia Union writing sports instead of working tables or washing dishes," he recalls.

Booker was born in Baltimore, one of four children. The family grew up in Youngstown, where his father was secretary of the YMCA and a minister.

After Virginia Union, Booker joined the staff of the Baltimore Afro-American, supplementing his meager salary by working in the shipyards.

After his Nieman year in 1951, he went to Cleveland but couldn't find a job with the white press. Then he received an offer from The Post.

"It was the wrong time, wrong everything," says Booker. "But Phil Graham said if you can take it, I'm willing to gamble."

Most of his stories ended up against the classifieds, he could only use one bathroom on the editorial floor and had limited access in segregated Washington. "If I went out in a holdup, they thought I was one of the damned holdup men. I couldn't get any cooperation," says Booker.

When the civil rights story began to dominate the news, Booker, by now working for Jet and Ebony, was one of the most energetic and knowledgeable chroniclers. While he was covering the Freedom Rides in 1961, then-Attorney

General Robert Kennedy called him to find out what was going on.

Swirling around in his seat, Booker pulls out papers that remind him of other stories. His six weeks at Little Rock. His interest in African politics, starting with the trip of Vice President Richard Nixon in 1957. The time he reported that President Jomo Kenyatta of Kenya had given a waiter, who dropped a bowl of soup on him, a karate chop at a State Dinner for Hubert Humphrey. "Knocked the living daylights out of him," recalls a shouting Booker.

"Well, after I wrote that, I had no friends at all."

Booker used his 10 years as a radio commentator for Group W-Westinghouse to ease one of his frustrations, "not being able to jump at the breaking story" in his weekly and monthly columns. Once he went on the air with an appreciation of National Urban League President Whitney Young while the network was still confirming the story that Young had drowned. "They said, 'What is this fool talking about?'" he says.

His pregarious style has benefited his personal life.

During a conference he was covering, he introduced Carol McCabe, a young reporter for the Voice of America, to the principal speakers, and later he and Miss McCabe were married. He has three grown children by a first marriage.

Booker and his wife, who is now a lawyer, live on Capitol Hill and in Annapolis, where he has just finished a novel.

His purpose has not changed over the years. "I worry about what goes on all over this country."



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Booker Recalls South High
Days, YSU and 'Doc' Ward

RENEWAL OFFER

The Washington Post

The Man From Jet

Simeon Booker not only covered a tumultuous era, he lived it

By Wil Haygood
Sunday, July 15, 2007

Boookuuuhhhh . . .

The other reporters would spot him sitting in front of the Sumner courthouse in Tallahatchie County, Miss. He'd be plotting how to get his interviews, where to find a bed, how he might fuel up the car -- and keep himself safe. Or they'd spot him coming out of Daisy Bates's home in Little Rock, a cold Co-Cola (as they pronounced the soft drink) in his hand, and they'd cackle about how he seemed to have doggone contacts everywhere. Daisy was a newspaperwoman who served as a kind of mother hen counselor to the kids, the kids Little Rock officials didn't want to integrate their schools.

Arkansas was scary, but not as scary as Mississippi. In Mississippi, you could end up in a coffin just trying to scribble in your notebook. In 1962, a European reporter by the name of Paul Guihard had been crossing the Ole Miss campus in Oxford, there to cover the protests against troops guarding James Meredith as he integrated the school. Someone blew a hole in Guihard's head with a gun. Simeon Booker was at Ole Miss that autumn. He knew the dark, kaleidoscopic danger of the place. He had been in Mississippi -- at that courthouse in Sumner to cover the Emmett Till murder trial. Till -- a 14-year-old black youth murdered by two white men in 1955 for allegedly whistling at a woman who was married to one of the men -- was Booker's damn story, and he knew it, his fingerprints on the reporting of it from the very beginning. They all knew it, every one of the reporters, the ones from the white press and certainly the ones from the Negro press.

Boookuuuhhhh . . .

They'd greet him before they reached him, before one palm shook the other palm.

He smoked in those days -- Kent cigarettes -- and there always seemed to be one hanging from his lips. All bow-tied up, in his horn-rimmed glasses and elegant suit, he looked like some background musician in Dizzy's or Count Basie's band. He looked like a bebopper.

Actually, he was the man from Ebony and Jet magazines, which meant, in a symbolic manner, beginning in the 1950s, he was the man from Negro and black America with a press pass. He was all over the South -- before it became a beat and a newspaper cause -- writing up his stories, getting them

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printed. When it was happening, when history was rolling like some kind of grainy as-yet-unseen newsreel, he didn't think about it much at all. "You just did the job," he says.

The wheels of the car rolled on then, and the notebooks stacked up in the glove compartment. He covered protests in Birmingham, Ala., civil rights deaths in Mississippi, voting marches in the Carolinas. He went out on campaign trails with the Kennedys. (The Kennedys liked him, learned much about black America from him. He was invited to JFK's funeral.) He covered the young John Conyers in Detroit. He walked down the streets of Harlem with a smile on his face, looking for musicians, looking for Adam Clayton Powell Jr., trying to find a slice of sweet potato pie.

He was so revered that when young black reporters came out of college in the 1950s, they looked him up. Like English department grads trekking off to Havana to find Hemingway.

But he wasn't in Havana. He was in one or another Southern town, angling into an assignment, and he'd hear his name cutting the air as it rolled off the lips of the scribes who had just spotted him. It sounded almost musical the way they'd call out his name:

Boookuuuhhhh . . .

AN OLD MAN HAS COME TO THE DOOR OF HIS HOME ON CAPITOL HILL. He has a butterscotch complexion. His eyeglasses are huge. He's wearing a checkered shirt and brown pants and soft-soled shoes. There are boxes stacked against a nearby wall -- much of his life, in words and photographs, pressed together. He's been assembling his personal papers, though he doesn't put any fancy spin on it. He was just a newspaperman. He just happened to be at the center of a lot of historical events. "My granddaughter sent this box of stuff over," he says, almost apologetically. Through life -- marriage, divorce, moving -- things got scattered.

His name is Simeon Booker, and for more than half a century, he watched and wrote about the heartbreaking and majestic and fitful upheavals of a nation. It was a mixture of just-the-facts-journalism tinged with advocacy journalism. His stories were packaged in those colorful magazines -- *Ebony* and *Jet* -- with the charcoal or buttery or sepia-toned faces gleaming on the front covers. The delectable-looking swimsuit model in the middle pages of *Jet* sometimes was the inducement that led you to his dispatch, but he didn't mind. He was rolling across the land, in a '59 Ford, a '62 Chevy. In Vietnam, he rode with Gen. William Westmoreland himself.

He retired from *Jet* only last year, when he was pushing 90. Through the years he's kept clippings, little mentions of himself in newspapers when he was breaking barriers. Here's a picture of him and Moses Wright, the black preacher from whose home Till was abducted. After the trial, after the white men were acquitted by an all-white jury, he and Wright toured the Midwest together, speaking at churches, raising money for the NAACP. "He was so well-spoken," he says of Wright.

In Simeon Booker's America, the corner drugstore in Tulsa or Cincinnati or Detroit might not carry every big-time Negro newspaper -- and the *Chicago Defender* and *Amsterdam News* and *Baltimore Afro American* were big in the 1950s and 1960s, in the hands of so many colored housewives, tucked in the armpits of so many black church deacons riding the train to those Negro Baptist conventions -- but they carried *Ebony* and *Jet*, which meant they carried Simeon Booker. In a way -- and he's practically rising up out of his chair as he says it -- Emmett Till made *Jet* magazine, helped make

Simeon Booker. "I could always pick up news about the case from my contacts down South. The white press would only say things like 'Negro Boy Missing in Mississippi.' But when Jet broke the story -- then the entire black press picked us up."

It was Jet that used the first photographs of young Till -- in his grown-man's hat -- smiling outward. Then came those explosive photos of Till in the open casket: Booker had told a photographer to follow him to the funeral home when the body arrived in Chicago. He was the only newsman there. "Ms. Till didn't have anybody else in the press she knew," he says of himself.

With the publication of the photographs of Till's mutilated body, it seemed like the whole world was talking about little Jet magazine. "We had to print extra copies!" Booker says.

Until then, Jet hadn't been about breaking news. But from that moment on, Simeon Booker would cover the big stories below the Mason-Dixon line. It was a tricky and dangerous assignment. But, somehow, he stayed safe. At times, it seemed as if he had eyes in the back of his head. He didn't, but he did have help from unexpected quarters: J. Edgar Hoover's FBI.

This is the same FBI that -- journalists and historians have shown -- was then attempting to undermine the civil rights movement and violate the civil liberties of the Rev. Martin Luther King Jr. and other leaders. Hoover had accused movement sympathizers of being communist supporters.

But Booker had established what he regarded as a remarkable friendship with Cartha "Deke" DeLoach, a top Hoover assistant. DeLoach introduced Booker to Hoover, took Booker's phone calls, told him which cities were safe and which the bureau felt unsafe for a black reporter to be trolling around in the night.

"How do you think Jet and Ebony got all those stories down South?" Booker says, his voice rising. "I know what all the civil rights people have said about Hoover and the FBI. But the FBI was of great help to me."

Booker goes on: "When I left for the South, I always told the FBI where I was going. I wanted to get back home! The FBI was really a kind of co-engineer with us. Jet and Ebony never would have been what we were without the FBI."

SIMEON BOOKER IS 88 YEARS OLD. His old Olivetti typewriter is on a table in front of him. It's beige, with a large, bold red sticker attached to the cover: EBONY, the sticker says. The outer covering is cobwebby, but the inside gleams of black. It still works; it still sounds like rat-tat-tat music if you hit the keys.

Booker has lived long enough that the things that once were the lovely and necessary tools of his trade now seem like museum exhibits.

As recently as last year, he was still calling around to his contacts, talking loudly, asking the soul on the other end of the line to speak up a little. He wears a hearing aid. He wanted to get the facts down; he had deadlines. Weekly deadlines, true enough, but deadlines nevertheless.

He's never thought of himself as the story. Which is why he's never talked about himself. The

accolades now coming his way befuddle him. "I don't need no damn honoring," he says.

Many of the pictures of him at work in the South were snapped by David Jackson, an Ebony-Jet man, too. Booker and Jackson went up and down tobacco roads together. Fried fish sandwiches and a Coke at anyplace that would serve them; candy bars in the front pockets. Booker carried pens and notebooks. Jackson carried his cameras. And also a pistol. When Booker found out about the pistol -- Jackson always tucked it away in a bag -- he lit into Jackson. "I said: 'Man, don't be carrying that thing around! You gonna get both of us killed.'"

There's a cornucopia of black-and-white photographs. Because it was a time of black and white.

In the box of photographs . . .

It's a wooden table, and more than a dozen souls -- black faces -- are wrapped around it. They're inside a Mississippi courtroom, covering the trial of some evil men who've killed that child, Mamie's boy, Emmett. You can almost feel the heat in the air, even see it. Maybe there's a fan humming just out of camera's view. Windows are open to Faulkner's Mississippi light. And somewhere, beyond the windows, folk are surely picking cotton. The men at the table are dressed nicely, churchy. They're newsmen. Some are smoking. The white reporters are elsewhere in the courtroom, owing to segregation. There's a woman in a black dress, huge white collar, with a face that appears both soft and worried. It's Mamie Bradley, Emmett's mother. She's come down from Chicago. The man sitting next to her, neat haircut, rail-thin, light-colored suit, cigarette dangling from his mouth, is the man from Jet magazine.

THE OLD NEWSPAPERMAN WAS BORN IN BALTIMORE. And he wasn't born hungry and impoverished, either. His daddy was executive director of the "colored" YMCA in Baltimore. There was food on the table, a stereo that played sweet music. Dreams were hatched. Young Simeon's uncle, J.H.N. Waring Jr., knew Carl Murphy, publisher of the Baltimore Afro American. And all through high school -- the family by then had moved to Youngstown, Ohio, so the father could open a colored Y there -- Booker told himself he wanted to write. In high school, he started sending stories to the Afro American. Some got published. In college, at Virginia Union in Richmond, he did the same thing; more stories began to get published. Little sweet stories about Negroes doing something prideful, sometimes edgier stories about a protest march.

Waring became enamored of young Simeon. He would take him to football games at Harvard. Waring was a Harvard graduate; he wore it like a high hat, too. Strolling the banks of the Charles River in Cambridge, Simeon felt light on his feet. He'd suck in the very air. "I was becoming acclimated to the Ivy League, which was odd, given my existence, where I was from and my community," he says.

He told the folks at Virginia Union -- he finished in 1942 -- he wouldn't be attending graduation. They wanted to know why not. He told them he had a job awaiting him at the Afro American, and jobs didn't wait, so he lit out from the campus like a man afire.

The bane of the Negro press was that although it could give you a leg up, a welcome into a newsroom when other newsrooms wouldn't, the pay was awful and the hours brutal. Upside: bylines. Downside: penury. Booker started out making \$18 a week. "I'd go \$10 in the hole every week," he remembers. He had to borrow money to keep afloat.

He found a place to lay his head though: He bunked at the old Baltimore Y, where his daddy had once worked.

He broke no big stories in Baltimore. He overheard no editors talking up his potential. "It was boring." He decided he was going to get out of there.

Most everybody in Negro journalism in the 1940s knew of William O. Walker, publisher of the weekly Call and Post in Cleveland, Ohio. A severe man, Walker, who was a big-time Republican, had a penchant for advertising and marketing; the attempted literary arc of news stories meant nothing to him, but he never got in the way of his reporters pursuing big stories. "I decided to go to Cleveland and work for William O. Walker," says Booker.

Landing in Cleveland in 1945, he soon enough found himself. He wrote about poverty and racial dramas. There were marches for better housing, clashes between citizens and police. He won a Newspaper Guild journalism prize. The bylines stacked up. The white reporters at the Cleveland Plain Dealer and the Cleveland News -- the daily papers -- got to know his byline. Nodded to him over at the courthouse.

But he hated election season. That was when Walker put his staffers on stories trumpeting Republican candidates running for office. "Every year before an election," recalls Booker, "the paper would turn into a Republican propaganda sheet."

His little snits -- asides about the publisher, the paper's election coverage -- turned from whispers to clearly articulated and easy-to-hear pronouncements. He also joined a union movement.

He no longer felt working conditions were endurable, and he left. The veterans looked at him like he was a fool. They shook their heads. He thought of a job at the Plain Dealer. Then he shook himself into a realization: "They already had their one black reporter."

The streets of Cleveland seemed barren, raw. He got a job pumping gas.

Friends of Simeon Booker have long marveled at his calmness in the face of crisis. He was pumping gas all right, but he was also reading Fitzgerald and Hemingway and Robert Lowell and Zora Neale Hurston. He was believing all would somehow be okay. "I never became depressed," he says.

They were willing to take him back over at the Call and Post, he says, because a grievance had been filed on his behalf by the union -- saying Booker had been subjected to unbearable working conditions because of his union support. He walked right back into the newsroom, took his desk and started filing his stories. The veterans chuckled. And while they chuckled, he dreamed of Harvard. He applied for a Nieman Fellowship, the coveted yearlong sabbatical at Harvard University.

A letter arrived in the mail. Lovely stationery. He's held onto it all these years:

Sir,

I beg to inform you that at a meeting of the President and Fellows of Harvard College held June 21, 1950 you were appointed Lucius W. Nieman Fellow in Journalism for the academic year 1950-1951.

Your obedient servant . . .

The Call and Post veterans were not chuckling anymore. His selection made nationwide news, especially in the Negro press. Booker was one of theirs, and black publishers announced the selection lavishly. An example of just one headline: "One Negro Among 1950 Nieman's."

Simeon Booker loved 1950s Cambridge: strolling across Harvard Yard, watching rowers skim the Charles River, smelling the falling leaves. He'd rummage around in the library for hours. A black lady rented rooms to black Harvard students, and she took care of him and his young family, a wife and two children then. During his Nieman year, he studied state and national governments, and the forces that made some cities succeed while others constantly seemed besieged by urban turmoil. In those pre-civil-rights-movement years, the study of race was considered exotic.

"Harvard had some famous race relations people," says Booker. "Arthur Schlesinger Sr. -- his son, Jr., just died recently -- took a personal interest in me. He was proud of my ambition."

One of the expectations for Nieman fellows is that -- despite ambition -- they return to the newsroom from which they have come. To Booker, that meant a return to Cleveland. But with his Nieman year ending, his mind raced in other directions. He held long debates within himself. "I decided to violate the rules and not go back to the Call and Post."

In his rented Cambridge room, on his typewriter, encircled in his cigarette smoke, he typed out 40 letters. Not to editors of the Negro press -- he figured he had outgrown them; he wanted to go where the knives were sharper and the tables bigger, to a daily newspaper. He wrote to the North, to the East and to the West. Licked the stamps and sealed the envelopes and strode through the Harvard air to drop them all in the mailbox.

"The only one to answer me," he says, "was Phil Graham of The Washington Post."

Phil Graham was iconoclastic, nervy, bold, a Harvard Law School graduate and publisher of The Post. Simeon Booker had strolled beneath the same Cambridge elms as Phil Graham once had.

There were no black reporters on the staff of The Post at the time. "I don't have anything right now," Graham wrote back to Booker. "But come to Washington, get a job, and I'll hire you at my first opening."

It was a huge carrot, and Booker couldn't resist grabbing it. He moved to Washington in 1952. He followed Graham's instructions: He got a job all right, stacking books at a government library.

But he loathed Washington. His freedom seemed to close in on him. It was the segregation. "I couldn't eat downtown," he says.

Graham, prescient, knew Booker would need moral support in those early days. "He told me: 'Don't hit anybody. If you get mad, just come up to my office and sit down and cool off.'"

And Booker took Graham's advice. A door closed in his face, another door, a finger pointing, telling him to keep going, to eat someplace else, and there he'd be, sitting outside the publisher's office, just

whiling away time, breathing in and out, reading the paper, front to back, then rereading the stories that fascinated him.

In Washington he lived temporarily with his aunt, Dorothy Waring Howard, over on S Street.

It was such a small fraternity -- black reporters on daily newspapers -- and word spread like sunshine when Simeon Booker joined *The Post* that same year. He became the paper's first black reporter.

He appreciated his hiring. But soon, melancholy set over him. "The *Post* just wasn't prepared for a black to come there," he says. "It was all new to them, having a black guy in the newsroom. It was recommended to me that I only use the bathroom on the fourth floor -- editorial -- so I did. I could eat in the cafeteria, and I was thankful for that. But I was always alone. It was only a few reporters who I even got to know."

He goes on: "I'd go out on a story and say, 'I'm Simeon Booker from *The Washington Post*.' And the person who I said it to would start laughing! They thought it was some kind of a joke."

He was proud of his front-page stories, even if they were mostly related to crime.

Inside the newsroom, he wanted to talk about the craft of reporting, but it didn't happen. "I never got into a discussion with anyone there about writing. I never could adjust."

What he wanted to do in Washington, in the nation's capital, was put all that Nieman learning to use. He wanted to dig deep into stories, find their nuance, explain to readers how government worked, how it affected their daily lives. He wanted to have time to spend on stories. In 1952 he was 34 years old, ready to ride and ride hard.

But his only assignments were off the crime blotter. He found himself eating alone on park benches. He missed Professor Schlesinger at Harvard. He liked Phil Graham and knew Graham liked him, but he couldn't bother the publisher with his sorrows.

Nearly two years passed, and he decided he couldn't take it anymore. There was no cake, no going-away party. "I just left. I sent Phil Graham a letter saying I appreciated the opportunity they had given me. No one ever discussed my leaving. That was the problem: I was in there, but I wasn't there. I think it was a social experiment. But I give them credit. They hired me."

He left in 1954.

He had licked another stamp, mailed off another letter, been offered another job.

AT THE END OF WORLD WAR II IN 1945, a onetime insurance man by the name of John H. Johnson started a magazine. He called it *Ebony*. The magazine, based in Chicago, was a glossy affair; it quickly drew comparisons to Henry Luce's *Life* magazine. And it caught on in black households. There it was, on grandmama's chifforobe, in daddy's hand, on mama's end table. Peeking from the mailbox in richly hued colors. Harry Belafonte and Sidney Poitier and Lena Horne and Josephine Baker, all come to life. Johnson also started *Jet*, a pocket-size compendium of news, tidbits and features.

Looking for someplace he could stretch, Simeon Booker joined Ebony and Jet in 1954. He relocated, driving his sturdy Ford sedan from Washington to Chicago.

Then came the murder of that 14-year-old.

His name still haunts the way the name Anne Frank haunts. A wide-eyed child scooped up into horror, not a soul around to come to his rescue.

In late August 1955, Emmett Till, in Mississippi visiting from Chicago, walked into a little grocery store in Money. Money was really just a sliver of roadside, cotton fields stretching into the Delta distance. A white woman, Carolyn Bryant, was inside the store. He either whistled or winked at her. Bryant got word of the insult to her husband, Roy. Roy Bryant and another man, J.W. Milam, plucked the unsuspecting Till from the home of Moses Wright. He was found days later, a bullet through his skull, in the Tallahatchie River. Booker had, like many, heard the first reports of the missing child over the radio. He leaped into action. "When he was kidnapped, I called his momma," says Booker.

He went to her Chicago home. He sweet-talked her into giving him some photographs. "Being slick in those days," he says, "I knew to keep the pictures to myself beyond the deadlines of the other newspapers." It didn't seem to matter that other reporters came knocking on her door; Booker had established a confidential relationship with her.

When the body first arrived at the funeral home -- before the funeral itself -- Booker was standing right there with Mamie Bradley. The mother instructed the funeral director to open the casket. Everyone said no: They expressed concerns about the boy's head, how the look of it might shock her; no embalmer could pretty him up. But Emmett Till's momma insisted. Booker had dragged a photographer along with him. As the casket opened, Booker felt his legs weaken at the awful sight inside; he helped hold Mamie Bradley up so she wouldn't collapse. Booker's photographer clicked. And as awful and shattering as the moment happened to be, Simeon Booker knew he had a story. He told Ebony and Jet that this was their story -- actually his story -- and that they must spare no expense or effort.

Mamie Bradley said she wanted the world to see what Mississippi had done to her Emmett. So the casket was open on the day of the funeral, and as the chubby-faced Emmett lay down to sleep, the world awoke. Jet splashed the photos all over the pages of its next issue. Booker was orchestrating the Jet coverage. The mainstream -- white -- press did not completely ignore the story, but Jet's hold on the psyche of black America was so powerful, so complete, that black folks looked upon the little magazine as gospel. Other news outlets began referring to Jet's coverage. Stores were selling out of Jet. It peeked from the jacket of shoeshine men in Harlem; teens gawked at it in the libraries that carried it. There was page after page of narrative inside, a defiant mother and grim photos. "We suddenly had to print thousands more copies of Jet," says Booker.

He told the Jet editors what they were going to do next. "I said to them, 'We're gonna cover the trial.'"

This would be on-the-scene reporting. It wasn't the type of thing Ebony and Jet did. "It was unheard of in those days," says Booker.

He made his way to Memphis before heading into Mississippi. He was looking for sources and contacts. And trying to get the lay of the land. Reporters were prone to be attacked covering civil rights events. Sometimes Booker would carry a Bible and affect the severe gait of a minister when asking for directions. He feared being attacked or being followed out of town if his true identity were revealed. He also did not wish to get stopped and find himself riding beside some sheriff's deputy on his way to some unknown lockup.

He was in his late 30s -- pushing 40 -- and on his first big story. Not a thing would stop him.

At the Till trial -- the black reporters were separated from the white reporters -- he wrote every day. He sat next to Mamie Bradley. *Ebony* and *Jet* didn't publish every day, of course. It didn't matter. "Stockpiling stories," Booker says. Over the upcoming weeks, the stories would appear: There were stories about prominent blacks in the area, stories about Till's relatives, stories about the black physician who operated the little motel in Mound Bayou, Miss., where Booker stayed while covering the trial. (Mound Bayou was notable for being founded by ex-slaves, for delicious sweet potatoes, and for the growing reputation of a former insurance salesman and resident by the name of Medgar Evers, who had the courage to crusade for civil rights in the heart of segregation.)

Being in Mississippi, writing, sweating under the armpits, checking to see if he were being followed on the dark road back over to Mound Bayou, thinking about the arc of the paragraphs that he would write, was everything he had wanted. He knew it was a story that needed to reach the eyes of the world. Never mind that the evidence was overwhelming against Till's murderers. Both men were acquitted.

It was when Booker returned from covering the Till trial -- the South would be part of his beat for years to come -- that he strolled over to FBI headquarters in Washington. He just wanted to chat up some officials, to gather insight about how federal law enforcement was going to deal with the Ku Klux Klan in the South. Hoover assistant DeLoach met with Booker.

DeLoach, who had heard about Booker's coverage of the Till trial, was known as a smooth and sophisticated operative within FBI headquarters and had the complete confidence of the powerful Hoover. DeLoach even took Booker in to meet Hoover himself. They all chatted; Booker recalls Hoover as being amiable.

From that moment on, DeLoach delighted in hearing from Booker after his Southern journeys. The two would have lunch together from time to time. DeLoach also told Booker he would help him as he moved around the South, sharing bits of intelligence the bureau had gathered that might help him stay safe. Booker was quite appreciative. He began getting stories about the FBI -- positive stories -- into *Jet* and *Ebony*. One about a black chauffeur working at FBI headquarters. One about a black undercover agent who had spied on some communists. (He wasn't an actual agent, as it would take years before the bureau began to hire black agents. He was a so-called "special" operative, but even that revelation had astonished Negro America and left it with a tinge of pride.)

In the post-civil rights years, journalists and historians would discover that the FBI created a wide and seemingly deceitful network that sought to discredit Martin Luther King and his operatives as they fought to gain equal rights. Many felt the bureau had attempted to undermine or control the civil rights movement during the 1950s and 1960s, while white supremacist murderers seemed to slip right

through its hands because of shoddy or lackluster investigations.

While researching his 1981 book, *The FBI and Martin Luther King, Jr.*, Pulitzer Prize-winning historian David J. Garrow came across some correspondence between Booker and the FBI. Garrow cringes at Booker's positive stories about those FBI "special" agents: "It's one of the most hilarious snow jobs in American history," he says. Booker "was on Hoover's 'friends list,'" says Garrow, speaking by phone from the University of Cambridge in England. "I never talked to Booker. He was just too friendly with the bureau." Garrow believes that Booker was caught up in the FBI information-sharing net because of timing. "You ask yourself: 'Why does Booker fall for this?' Timing was crucial. As of 1957-1958, anyone could be granted the belief that the bureau was on the side of the good guys. So the question becomes: When should Booker have realized the internal truth about the bureau and the movement? Well, the King-Hoover face-off doesn't come until 1964. In terms of making moral judgments on people, the 'when' of it is important. From the viewpoint of Deke DeLoach, Simeon Booker was probably the most important black man in America then. *Ebony* and *Jet* had big footprints."

Garrow goes on: "There were so few black reporters then. If there was a big government agency -- like the FBI -- that treated you with respect, well, that's awfully easy to get romanced by. The bureau -- not withstanding the image we have of them today -- were some smooth and impressive guys."

An 86-year-old man is on the phone from Hilton Head, S.C. Cartha "Deke" DeLoach left the FBI in 1970. He went on to another career in the corporate world. "I loved my friendship with Booker," he says, recalling lunches they had and the cocktail soirees Booker would invite him to. The bureau was not trying to co-opt Booker during its relationship with him, says DeLoach. "I simply tried to be helpful. I wanted to make sure he was safe." DeLoach says he maintained a relationship with Booker because of two reasons: "He was a fair journalist, and he had a good personality." He says he thinks the bureau has been unfairly maligned in the area of civil rights.

"He was an imperfect pioneer," Garrow says of Booker. "But that shouldn't, and will not, substantially detract from how history regards him."

Booker says: "Maybe [they] looked at me as some kind of informer. I was giving them information -- far as where I was going, who I was going to cover -- and they were giving me information about staying safe. I never told a soul. I wanted to protect the FBI. I got a picture somewhere of me and Hoover and DeLoach. I never hung it up in my office because I knew what people would think. [But] I'd have never gotten into the South were it not for J. Edgar Hoover and Deke DeLoach. DeLoach saved my neck more times than I can remember. He'd advise me: 'This assignment is too difficult to do. This town is not safe.'"

That's the unmistakable soft-hard grin of Attorney General Robert F. Kennedy. He and the man from Jet are in Kennedy's office. A big klieg light is visible. Some kind of interview has obviously just taken place. Booker's association with Kennedy and the FBI continued to pay notable dividends. In Alabama, Booker had been on one of the buses that carried the Freedom Riders when they were blocked by a forming mob. Booker slipped off the bus through the back. "Luckily," he says, "a black cabdriver happened to be just then going by. I got in and said, 'Take me to [Martin Luther King Jr. aide] Fred Shuttleworth's house.' Then, when I got there, I called the FBI. I told them these people

were in trouble. And then they sent in agents.” The Kennedy administration also dispatched a plane to ferry Booker and others out of Alabama. In the air the Freedom Riders all looked over at him. Grinning, happy, safe.

Boookuuuuuhhhh . . .

IF EBONY AND JET HAD CUT THEIR PUBLISHING TEETH ON ENTERTAINMENT NEWS -- Lena Horne becoming a star, Duke Ellington’s foreign jaunts, Eartha Kitt’s seductiveness -- they now had added hard news to their imprimatur. “Once the Freedom Riders got bombed,” says Booker, “well, Ebony and Jet had to get off that society kick and get down to business.”

He went to Africa. He went out on the presidential campaign trail. He was one of the first blacks to show up on those nationwide TV news talk shows.

The years rolled over. He cried when Jack Kennedy was assassinated. He cried when Martin and Bobby were cut down. Tears for America. He stayed at Ebony-Jet, reporting on the world he saw through his horn-rimmed glasses.

They’ve just landed, he and a military officer, in ‘Nam. He’s wearing a lightweight green military jacket, and on one side of his chest, in stenciling, it says BOOKER. On the other side of his chest it says EBONY-JET. There he is, being introduced to Gen. Westmoreland. And, oh, how the black soldiers wanted to meet the man from Jet. They all read Jet, read it back in Chicago, at the drugstore counter in Watts, in Harlem; they wanted to know if he had any doggone copies of Jet with him. He didn’t. (They’d have to wait until they got back stateside to get their peek at those curvy centerfolds.) Vietnam scared the bejesus out of him. He’d find himself out on patrols with infantrymen, looking every which way, trying to imagine which direction the bullets might come flying from. He still has his helmet from ‘Nam. “It was just not knowing when a stray bullet might come through and hit you.”

SIMEON BOOKER WROTE A COUPLE OF BOOKS. Both are unremembered. One was Black Man’s America, a treatise on race relations with scant personal information about his own life. The other was a children’s book, Susie King Taylor, Civil War Nurse.

Eleanor Clift, Newsweek contributing editor, who first became aware of Booker when they had neighboring offices during the Carter administration, says she’s surprised that Booker hasn’t gotten more attention for his work. She wonders if it might have something to do with a generational shift. “First,” she says, “he was before his time. Then when things became more radical amongst some blacks, they didn’t think he moved fast enough. He kinda got caught between two eras. He is deserving of far more appreciation than he’s gotten from both whites and blacks.”

Booker was approached a couple of years back by folks who were making documentaries about Emmett Till. They wanted him to talk, but he wouldn’t. He also he never got around to writing a book about covering the South, about the movement. About Martin, and Medgar Evers, shot down as he returned to his home in Jackson, and the Rev. George Lee, shotgunned to death in Mississippi for trying to register blacks to vote. A book about poor, ghostly sweet Emmett. Carol Booker, his second wife, legal counsel to the Broadcasting Board of Governors, believes all those deaths took a toll. Sipping sweetened iced tea with George Lee one day; the next, the minister is dead. “Took a lot out of him,” is how Carol frames it.

And that's why he's talking now, she says. "I told him I didn't want him taking this stuff to his grave."

Here sits the man from Jet, someplace in the South, on some happy soul's crawfish boat. He's peeling away. He's wearing a goofy looking hat and khaki pants. He seems happy as can be. Because it wasn't all furtive reporting, dodging the Klan. Sometimes it was sitting beneath a pretty elm tree, looking around. Or talking to some man about family, about upcoming planting season. Or watching as some elderly lady sliced him a piece of her homemade peach pie. Or, like now, on the crawfish boat, rocking back and forth, and buttering his meal by moonlight. Sometimes the man from Jet thought he had the best job in the whole wide world.

Wil Haygood is on book leave from *The Post's Style* section. He can be reached at 20071@washpost.com. [He will be fielding questions and comments about this article Monday at noon at washingtonpost.com/liveonline.](#)

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AJR Features

From AJR, **December 2012/January 2013** issue

Sixty-Five Years of Covering the News

Pioneering black journalist Simeon Booker Jr. will soon be inducted into NABJ's Hall of Fame. And his book about his remarkable career comes out in April. Mon., November 26, 2012.

By **Amber Larkins**

Amber Larkins (amberelarkins@gmail.com) is a graduate student at the Philip Merrill College of Journalism at the University of Maryland.

Carol McCabe Booker spent three years writing in the upstairs of her Capitol Hill home. Periodically she would take sections or chapters downstairs for her husband of 40 years, Simeon Booker Jr., 94, to review and flesh out.

"One of the nice things about how it went is he never would say, 'This is terrible' or 'Are you kidding?' " she says.

He usually told her that she was getting there, and she would take the material back upstairs to work on it some more. Or he'd tell her it was great, which usually meant it was time to head back upstairs to start on the next section.

"Carol finished the book for me," Booker says.

Booker's book, "Shocking the Conscience: A Reporter's Account of the Civil Rights Movement," will be available from the University Press of Mississippi in April. It is a history of Booker's 65-year journalism career, which explains how blacks went from being completely ignored in the mainstream press to being the focus of heavy coverage of the civil rights movement, and the role of Booker's civil rights reporting in Jet magazine.

Booker, a humble man with thick glasses, covered many major events during his long career, including many epochal civil rights moments, including the desegregation of Little Rock's Central High School, and the administrations of 10 presidents.

"As one of the nation's leading black writers, he never seemed terribly impressed with the important role he was playing in journalistic history," says Moses Newson, who worked as a reporter for the Afro-American newspapers and covered many of the same events.

In January, [Booker's legacy will be recognized by the National Association of Black Journalists](#) , when he will be inducted into its Hall of Fame.

Booker was born in Baltimore but raised in Youngstown, Ohio. His uncle was friends with Carl Murphy, the publisher of the Afro-American daily newspapers, who inspired Booker to become a journalist. After Booker graduated from Virginia Union University, he began working for the Afro-American in Baltimore, but he was dissatisfied.

"The papers were so alike that I wanted to move on from there," Booker says.

Booker returned to Ohio and worked for Cleveland's Call and Post, a black weekly, where he won the Newspaper Guild Award for reporting on the city's slum housing. He also won the Wendell L. Willkie Award for a series on ghetto schools.

In 1950, he finally became a Nieman Fellow at Harvard University after two unsuccessful applications. When his year as a fellow ended, Booker decided it was time for a job change.

"I wanted to work on a daily newspaper," he recalls, "There weren't many blacks working on daily newspapers."

He wrote a letter to the publisher of the Washington Post, asking for a chance to become a reporter. He was told to come to Washington and that he'd be hired as soon as there was an opening. Booker became the Post's first black reporter a few months later.

Booker says his greatest strength as a journalist was his persistence. "I think it was my desire to be a journalist, a reporter, that made me always want to do a better job than the next guy," he says.

Booker encountered segregation and racism at the Post. He couldn't eat at restaurants near the Post's building, and his colleagues were not as friendly as he had expected, he says.

"I was always under a lot of pressure," Booker adds.

He set a goal of getting a banner headline at the Post, and as soon as he did, he left the paper to join Jet magazine. He moved to Chicago, where he would become involved in the civil rights movement. "I started covering the worst kind of murder, that no one was covering, and gave it some attention," Booker says.

Eventually, he turned his attention southward. Booker would carry a Bible with him when he traveled in the South, pretending he was a poor preacher to protect himself from angry whites. But he didn't realize how dangerous the South was until he first traveled to Mississippi to cover a

voting rights rally in April 1955.

Some 15,000 black men, women and children from three states gathered around a huge tent in Mound Bayou to hear speeches from people like Rev. George Washington Lee, who was engaged in helping blacks register to vote. Shortly thereafter, on May 7, 1955, Lee was shot to death while driving his car in Belzoni, Mississippi.

"This man – Lee – his murder was not reported in any white newspaper. The black press of Mississippi and Alabama, Chicago – they covered it, but not the white press," Carol Booker says.

Booker attended Lee's funeral, wrote the story and vowed Jet's coverage of any similar crimes in the future would be hard for the white press to ignore.

In August of that year in Mississippi, 14-year-old Emmett Till was kidnapped, brutally beaten, murdered and thrown in the Tallahatchie River. Till supposedly had whistled at a white woman, precipitating the brutal attack.

Booker covered Till's funeral in Chicago, where the boy's mother, Mamie Till Bradley, lived. Bradley insisted on an open casket funeral so the world could see what had been done to her son.

Photographer David Jackson took pictures of the corpse's horribly swollen and mutilated face. "That picture in Jet magazine remained in the minds of teenage blacks," Carol Booker says. She says these young people were to inject vital new energy into the civil rights movement.

Booker covered the Emmett Till trial in Mississippi. A hundred white journalists also covered the trial. The black press and black Rep. Charles Diggs Jr., were forced into a corner where they could barely hear the proceedings. The jury declared J.W. Milam and Roy Bryant not guilty of murder because there was no proof the body was Till's.

"After that black events started being covered more, but you still could get the straight story from Jet," Carol Booker says.

Booker has been considered an icon of black journalism and the civil rights movement, in part because his work was so widely read in the black community. "Jet was in the barbershop, in the bars, in salons," Carol Booker says. "It was in the black doctors' offices and black dentists' [offices]. There were subscriptions to private homes."

Jet, a pocket-sized weekly magazine, was considered the bible of things of interest to African Americans. It covered every aspect of the civil rights movement and also debunked false rumors, encouraging readers to look into things rather than taking them at face value.

"If it wasn't in Jet, it didn't happen," Carol Booker says.

Booker became the magazine's Washington bureau chief in 1955. He wrote a weekly column called Ticker Tape, which included possible employment opportunities for blacks and gave credit

to blacks who were achieving important things. He gave national exposure to those who wouldn't make it into a national magazine because of their race.

"Covering the black freedom movement was more than a job for Simeon," his wife says. "It was even more than a mission. It was his life."

Booker went with the Freedom Riders when they set out on a bus from Washington to travel through the South. They ran into trouble when they reached Birmingham. Booker learned that a bus an hour ahead of them, on which Newson of the Afro-American was traveling, had been set on fire. Then the Freedom Riders were attacked by the Ku Klux Klan.

Booker cut a hole in a newspaper, pretending to read it as he observed the violent mob.

"Sometimes [Booker] struck me as an intellectual professor who might be moonlighting as a fearless, crackerjack newsman blessed with a profound talent at sizing up people and situations," Newson says.

This particular situation was dangerous indeed. "There was no way they were going to get out alive without help," Carol Booker says. Booker called Attorney General Robert F. Kennedy and the Freedom Riders were rescued.

"He had terrible experiences like freedom riding, but as a journalist, you can't let it terrify you." Carol Booker says. "You have to suppress certain things like feelings and emotions."

Booker, known as the dean of the black press corps in Washington, has received many honors, including the National Press Club's Fourth Estate Award in 1982. He also has mentored many young black journalists.

One of them was Roy Betts, who met Booker in 1977 through a mutual friend when he was getting ready to graduate from Howard University. He met with Booker to ask his advice on where he should look for a job.

"I couldn't believe how much time he gave this fresh-out-of-college, wet-behind-the-ears budding young journalist," Betts says. Two weeks later, Betts was hired to work in Johnson Publishing Co.'s Washington bureau for Jet and Ebony magazines.

Betts describes Booker as a quiet, very studious man who listened and observed. But when it was time to ask a question or pursue an angle, he knew exactly which buttons to push.

Carolyn DuBose was another young journalist mentored by Booker. DuBose recalls interviewing the daughter of Booker T. Washington for Ebony, and finding the woman in poverty. She was reluctant to write the story because it might embarrass Portia Washington Pittman, but Booker told her to write the piece.

"Booker believed that people would be moved by her plight, and he was right," Dubose says. "By

going public with her living conditions, it altered her whole life."

The Johnson Publishing Co. bureau became an after-work hangout, where people would gather to talk and play penny poker, Betts recalls. "The building at 1750 Pennsylvania Avenue was a lively location filled with top members of the media gathering news of the time," Dubose says.

The building was also well-known for its popular Christmas parties, which were organized and thrown by Booker. Richette Haywood, who worked for Booker as an assistant editor in the late 1980s, remembers him calling it a party with a purpose. "Only Mr. Booker could have persuaded both the Republican National Committee Chair Lee Atwater and the Democratic National Committee Chair Ron Brown to attend our party, accept a dual award and actually stay and enjoy the evening together," Haywood says.

Booker retired from Jet in 2007, when he was 88 years old.

"Retiring after all those years, writing the book for him was a great way not only to feel he was doing something useful, but to leave a legacy..a compact representation of what he had covered in 65 years, and what it meant," Carol Booker says.

Booker emphasizes that journalists should know what they want to cover when they embark on their careers.

"I jumped and wasted a lot of time figuring out what I was interested in in the beginning," he says, "But once you get situated, then you can move."