



RFK IN THE DELTA

Writer Ellen Meacham discusses upcoming book on historic visit

BY BILL ROSE



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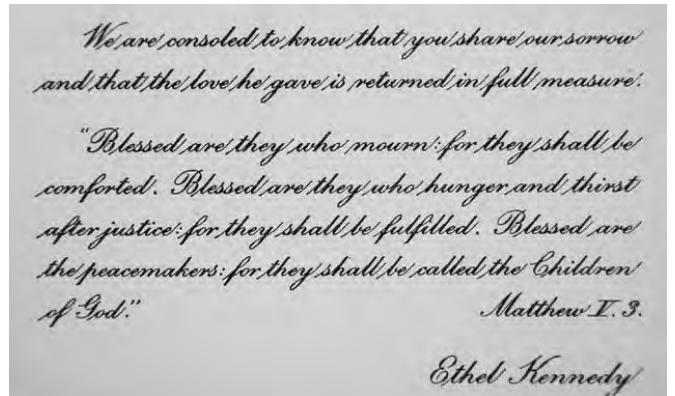


TROY CATCHINGS



PHOTO PROVIDED BY THE CARR FAMILY

Left, Bobby Kennedy and Andy Carr shake hands in Clarksdale. Above, Kennedy meeting with the public in downtown Clarksdale. Below, a note the Carr family received from Ethel Kennedy after Bobby's death.



In the spring of 1967, Sen. Robert F. Kennedy blazed a trail through the Mississippi Delta, stopping at the wretched little shacks of poor black people in search of poverty and hunger. He found plenty of both.

Kennedy's trip, part of a U.S. Senate subcommittee's investigation into poverty in America, thrilled black people who had long suffered under Jim Crow. Hungry for hope, a thousand thronged to the charismatic senator's car as it pulled into Clarksdale. But the tour, splashed on front pages across America, enraged the vast majority of Mississippi's white people, who remembered Kennedy's role in sending thousands of soldiers to Ole Miss to quell a riot over admission of its first black student, James Meredith. In Cleveland, newspaper editor Cliff Langford angrily confronted Kennedy to claim no one was starving there.

"Step over here and I'll introduce you to some," said Kennedy, referring to several children who stood nearby, none of whom had eaten anything except molasses by mid-afternoon.

The motorcade of RFK and Sen. Joseph Clark of Pennsylvania, accompanied by journalists, staff, and federal

Delta hunger found its way into his platform and campaign speeches.

and state law enforcement officers, made for great drama as they visited Greenville then drove up Highway 61 into Cleveland, Mound Bayou and Clarksdale, making unscheduled stops.

Now, fifty years later, Ole Miss journalism professor Ellen Meacham is writing a new book that reveals how RFK's Delta visit—including one tiny shack that housed fifteen people—shook Kennedy to his core and had a major impact on his 1968 presidential campaign that was cut short by an assassin's bullet. Delta hunger found its way into his platform and campaign speeches.

In an exhibition of skilled shoe leather reporting, Meacham digs up the children Kennedy met, recounting their memories of the visit, what it meant to them and their parents, and how their lives have turned out after those long ago childhoods of wrenching poverty.

Filled with rich detail and vivid anecdotes, it makes for riveting reading about a slice of Mississippi's history often overlooked in the state's own textbooks.

Meacham sat down with *Delta Magazine* to discuss her upcoming book, due out next spring just before the 50th anniversary of RFK's death.



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Meacham

Q. How did you come to write this book?

A. I read Curtis Wilkie's book *Dixie*. There was a page or two on RFK's trip to the Delta and I was struck by the image of Robert Kennedy in the shack with this baby. Here was this son of power and privilege, brother to the president, senator, former attorney general, wealthy, in the shack with this baby who was malnourished in these desperate conditions. I had always thought of the Kennedys with a kind of patina, but having him in this dark place interested me. My next thought was—what happened to the baby? Then, I read Evan Thomas's biography of Kennedy, and in it, Kennedy was at a cocktail party after returning from Mississippi and said, "You don't know what I've seen. Everything I've done up to now has been worthless." So, I wanted to know what he saw that would generate that kind of reaction.

Q. Exactly how was he affected by what he saw?

A. He was appalled. He had a special connection with children and seeing them suffer got to him. I think Marian Wright made it really clear to him the consequences of he and his brother the president walking a fine political line on being supportive of civil rights, but not going too far. There had been a cost to foot dragging, to holding the civil rights movement back to a little slower pace. Then, he thought it would be easy to get some emergency aid down there after he went back to Washington. But, when he ran into people who had no interest in solving the problem, it frustrated and baffled him at first. Then, it made him angry and a moral outrage started to build. He felt like, "children were suffering damn it, why don't you get it fixed." He had ten children himself at the time.

Q. What in the Delta affected him most?

A. I think it was Cleveland. You can see in the pictures when he is out at Freedom Village and the job training place in Greenville that

he is interested and engaged. But, in Cleveland he looks really grave. He's seeing the real problem. So, I think it was Annie White's child there on the floor and possibly the confrontation with the editor (Cliff Langford of *The Bolivar Commercial*) that made a difference. He saw the local folks were either unaware or deliberately in denial. Also, in 1967 things had gotten a lot worse pretty quickly. Some people may not have been aware of how bad it was. Hunger happens behind closed doors, in the middle of night when you start to cry in your bed because you don't have enough to eat. A lot of people in America still don't have enough to eat. It happens with the poor and the elderly, to those without a voice or power. They now call it "food insecure." They run out of food at some point in the month.

Q. Were you able to find any of the children Kennedy met back then? How are they today?

A. I did. I focus in the book on four people who were children when Kennedy came through—one in Greenville, two in Cleveland and one in Clarksdale. One of those kids told me, "It changed my mother's life," because she had been rejected for welfare twice, but after Kennedy came and knocked on her door, they signed her up. One is very poor, still struggling. Others made it into the middle class, but just barely, and are hanging on there. No one has struck it rich and living high.

Q. Did RFK's widow, Ethel, talk to you?

A. Yes. She told a really powerful story of the impact it had on Bobby emotionally and what he wanted his children to understand about it and how lucky they were to live the way they lived and to not take it for granted and to serve their country and make it better. I interviewed two of his older children who remembered it very clearly. They were struck by the fact he was so passionate, so emotional over what he had seen in Mississippi.

Q. What was the most significant thing you unearthed?

A. Probably the impact it had on his race for president. Vietnam was the really big thing that led Kennedy to run. But, there was a connection between Vietnam and the war on poverty in that money spent on war was money we could spend on hungry children. In his campaign speeches he talked about seeing children starving in Mississippi. He talked about that until he died. It never left him.

Q. How did the white establishment in Mississippi react?

A. They were deeply offended and defensive. "How dare he come down here and try to tell us what to do. He needs go back to New York and Harlem. You can find hungry people everywhere. He is just trying to make us look bad, or it's a political stunt to get more African-Americans to vote Democrat."



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Q. When did you know you had enough for a book?

A. It took me seven years to find the child on the floor in the shack that he was so moved by. Once I found that person, I thought, OK, I've got the makings of a book. You know, it's a solitary process. You constantly ask yourself is this enough? Is this right? Can I make this into what it needs to be?


Q. What was your biggest challenge?

A. Balancing work and family and this project. During the process, I had a baby, my mother got cancer, and I was teaching. Another family member also got a very serious kind of cancer and my husband had to have some major surgery. At times I didn't think I would ever get through. It sort of became a debt of honor to myself. And, so when I think about finishing it, I think I've paid that debt.

Q. Your most compelling interview and why?

A. Probably Catherine Wilson outside Greenville at Freedom City. She is still there after all those years. She just had such an incredible life before Kennedy got there, being one of the foot soldiers of the civil rights movement and going through all the victories and disappointments of trying to get something done. I took a documentary crew from West Palm Beach there and they were stunned by where and how she lives. One of them said, "Quite honestly, I feel really bad. What do I have to complain about? Nothing. How can she be so positive, so cheerful?" It kept him up all night. He had had very little experience with poverty.

Q. What's the one little nugget, the one great thing in there we really should read?

A. I think the center three chapters using Greenville, Clarksdale and Cleveland, because those are sort of told from the perspective of these people and what their lives were like in Mississippi. The other part is how Kennedy reacted with them. That is the fullest part of the book, the most compelling. You learn all about their lives and what they are like. 



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