

RFK IN THE DELTA

Writer Ellen Meacham discusses upcoming book on historic visit

BY BILL ROSE



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TROY CATCHINGS

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. DM

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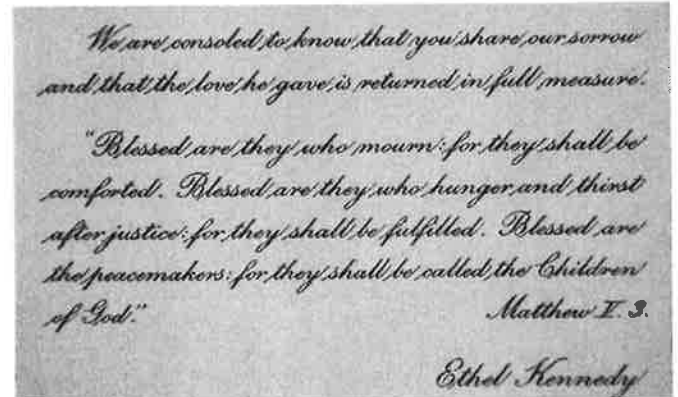


TROY CATCHINGS



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.