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Exploring Civil Rights through Mississippi Collections

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Abstract

Bibliographic instruction is an important tool to teach students about services and collections offered in a library. At the University of Southern Mississippi and the University of Mississippi, curators often use instruction sessions to teach students about the civil rights history of the state. Through correspondence, photographs, government documents, and music, students become aware of the activities of civil rights activists and the segregationists they fought against. This paper explores the various civil rights primary sources and subjects covered in instruction sessions at the University of Southern Mississippi and the University of Mississippi.

Keywords

civil rights, Mississippi, blues music, segregation, library instruction

Instruction

In Mississippi, the civil rights movement represents a defining aspect of the state’s history. The fiftieth anniversary of Freedom Summer in 2014 highlighted the sacrifices and accomplishments of volunteers, both national and local. Special Collections at the University of Southern Mississippi (USM) (http://lib.usm.edu/spcol) and the University of Mississippi (UM) (http://www.libaries.olemiss.edu/uml/archives-special-collections) contain collections that highlight the work of civil rights volunteers, segregationists, university histories, and music that reflected the racial divide.

Library Instruction

As part of the instruction program at both universities, curators speak to students through information literacy, rhetoric, history, and music classes. The curators also meet with non-university constituencies, such as community organizations or visiting high school groups. With rich collections documenting the civil rights struggle in the state, librarians often emphasize these materials.
The format for instruction can differ due to the needs of the class, students, and professors. The main components include providing a general overview about Special Collections including guidelines for use, how these collections differ from the materials in the main library and public library, and searching for collections and images using the website. After addressing the logistics of using and accessing collections, the curators review collection topics and primary source formats through the exploration of the collections through examples.

Due to the wealth of material about civil rights and the importance of the struggle to the state’s history, this topic becomes a focal point for the classes. While speaking about the civil rights history of the state, it is evident that many students are lacking general information on the African American struggle. Looking at past Mississippi history textbooks, it is apparent that the section on civil rights in the 1980 edition covers only 8 pages while a 1964 edition has one page which mentions “federal encroachment” and “despite such incidents as the slaying of NAACP leader Medgar Evers, and the murder of three civil rights workers at Philadelphia, race relations showed a year by year improvement during the 1960s” (Bettersworth, 1964)

Segregationist Papers

When speaking about civil rights history in the state, it would make sense to start with 19th century history. Unfortunately, some students have a hard time identifying with this era because of its distance from their lives. Even teaching about the 1960s can seem foreign to them. Starting with the rabble-rouser politician Theodore G. Bilbo, Jennifer Brannock at the University of Southern Mississippi and Greg Johnson at the University of Mississippi explore the different aspects of how politicians, organizations, and state agencies attempted to prevent integration in the state.
Between 1910 and 1947, Theodore Bilbo served as governor of Mississippi and United States Senator. While he was a staunch supporter of the New Deal, he only supported those programs to benefit poor white people in the state. His white supremacist beliefs can be easily summarized through the title of his popular 1947 book *Take Your Choice: Separation or Mongrelization* (Figure 1).

Focusing on Bilbo as one aspect of the segregationist perspective serves as a powerful way to illustrate how a prominent and popular politician can be loved and hated within a state and around the country. In the late 1940s after Bilbo’s election to a third term as U.S. Senator, he received a great deal of criticism from people around the country. Father Divine, the religious cult leader, conducted anti-Bilbo efforts by producing marketing material and a letter writing campaign against Bilbo’s segregationist policies (Watts, 1991).

The 2500 boxes in the Bilbo collection at the University of Southern Mississippi show that Bilbo was quite the archivist. In addition to folders of materials highlighting gumbo recipes, cabbage legislation, and a one million dollar reward for Hitler, Bilbo kept folders of hate letters received from people critical of his views on race relations. By highlighting these letters, students become aware of how the average person, not just a cult leader, voiced disdain toward Bilbo’s beliefs and policies. One letter includes a newspaper clipping of Bilbo standing in front of a barn and a mule. In the letter, the writers, airmen from the US Naval Air Station in Fort Lauderdale, Florida, asked Bilbo in reference to the picture, “Being Yankees ourselves and not

Figure 1: Cover of Theodore G. Bilbo’s book *Take Your Choice: Separation or Mongrelization* (Bilbo, 1947).
knowing much about animals, we would like to find out one thing. In the picture, which is the Jackass – the white one in the background or the one with the hat on? (T. G. Bilbo, personal correspondence, June 28, 1946).” In addition to this letter, Bilbo’s response can be found in the collection. He writes, “I am sorry that you are so lacking in information about animals that you could not tell a gray mule from a jackass. But let me say in passing that I know this mule and have dealt with him and I am glad to tell you that he has more horse-sense than the three so-called men who signed this letter…” (T. G. Bilbo, personal correspondence, July 18, 1946). Including Bilbo’s response allows the students to have insight into Bilbo’s beliefs and interactions with others.

To explore how Bilbo’s policies went outside the state’s boundaries, materials relating to his work on the Greater Liberia Act with Marcus Garvey and The Peace Movement of Ethiopia are highlighted. In the Greater Liberia Act, also known as the Repatriation Act, Bilbo proposed that the federal government provide the land and means for African Americans to move to Africa to start a free colony. Working with Black Nationalist organizations, Bilbo forged an alliance with some African Americans on this issue.

![Petition of American Negroes](image)

**Figure 2:** Petition signed by African Americans in support of the Greater Liberia Act (Petition, c1939).

To emphasize the acceptance of this bill, students become acquainted with an original copy of the bill, a letter from a Mississippi woman interested in the “negro
question,” and copies of petitions signed by African Americans from New York City in support of the bill (Figure 2).

Using Bilbo and his collection as a starting point, curators move into the 1950s and 1960s to discuss other segregationist groups in the state. After Brown v. Board, two important segregationist groups emerged – the White Citizens Council and the Mississippi State Sovereignty Commission. The Citizens Council can be described as the uptown Klan, which counted businessmen, lawyers, law enforcement, and politicians as members. They claimed to use nonviolent means including economic intimidation, which contrasts with the approach often used by the Ku Klux Klan (KKK). To garner attention for their efforts, the Council created a speaker’s bureau that travelled the country speaking about segregation in Mississippi and influencing communities as far as California to create their own Citizens Council chapters. In addition, they created private, segregated schools and publicity to encourage their separate but equal agenda (Figure 3).

Working hand-in-hand with the Citizen Council was the Mississippi State Sovereignty Commission. This taxpayer-funded state agency’s sole purpose was to “defend state’s rights” and prevent integration. As seen in the Figure 4, it is evident how the various segregationist organizations were linked: many Klan members were Citizen Council members and the Sovereignty Commission directly supported the Council. The Sovereignty Commission dealt with all things related to race relations and the civil rights movement, including education and violence. One civil rights event that all students know is the disappearance and

Figure 3: Recruitment pamphlet created by the Mississippi Citizens Council (Why Should I Belong, c1962).
murder of the three civil rights workers (James Chaney, Andrew Goodman, and Michael Schwerner) in Neshoba County. Students are able to see the reach of the agency through a Sovereignty Commission report documenting the disappearance of these men and the belief that the men were alive and well in Alabama (Investigation, organization report, June 29, 1964).

Another story that resonates with students is the story of Edgar and Randy Williamson. In Mississippi in the 1960s, there was a law where a person was considered black if his or her racial heritage included more than 1/8 African American lineage. Because the Williamson brothers’ great, great grandmother was black, the white schools in the area refused to admit them and the black schools could not admit them because they were legally considered white and admitting them would violate Mississippi law. The boys, seen in Figure 5, were 8 and 9 years old and had never attended a day of school.

Figure 4: Schedule of payments from the Mississippi State Sovereignty Commission to the Mississippi Citizens Council (Schedule of Payments, 1965).
All of this background on the segregationist past of the state gives students an awareness of the kinds of activities that impacted the daily lives of African Americans as well as the larger issues at play in the state. After discussing the history of segregation in Mississippi, curators delve into the papers of Freedom Summer volunteers and other activists to illustrate how African Americans and sympathetic white Mississippians fought back.

Activist Papers

Freedom Summer brought people from all over the country to Mississippi to promote voting rights, establish Freedom Schools, and to strengthen the Mississippi Freedom Democratic Party, a political party created in response to the lack of African American representation in the National Democratic Party. What resonates most with the students are the photographs of Herbert Randall.
These photographs highlight the activities in the Hattiesburg area including Mississippi Freedom Democratic Party meetings, a fish fry at local activist Vernon Dahmer’s house, the aftermath of an attack on a local rabbi, and images of men looking at Ebony and Jet magazines for the first time.

In addition to photographs, the libraries maintain collections that reflect the publicity created to promote integration, as well as paperwork that was created during the movement. Civil rights groups like the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee (SNCC) and the Council of Racial Equality (CORE) created pamphlets, posters, and buttons that were used across Mississippi and the country (Figure 6). On a local level, flyers were created to alert locals to area meetings and celebrations. Participants in the Freedom Schools wrote articles and drew pictures for Freedom School publications about their experiences living in Mississippi acknowledging the different ways in which blacks and whites were treated. Volunteers who came from all over the country wrote letters and diaries expressing their experiences working with activists as well as the violence and hardships they encountered.

In 1962 the University of Mississippi was forced to integrate when the Kennedy Administration called in the National Guard and U. S. Marshals to ensure the safe enrollment of James Meredith, the first African American to attend the university. A night of riots between students, outsiders, and the National Guard left destruction around campus and resulted in two deaths. The UM has a number of collections with materials related to the integration riot. One of the most powerful is James Meredith’s own collection, which he donated to the university. Meredith kept every letter he received as a student at UM, including letters of support as well as
hate mail and death threats. These are a valuable resource for giving a glimpse into the life of someone deeply involved in the struggle for integration (Figure 7).

Figure 7: Letter to James Meredith from a person asking him to stop his efforts to integrate the University of Mississippi.

Music

Music played important roles on both sides of the integration divide. Hate groups like the KKK printed sheet music and made recordings. Students are visibly affected when they see works like the 1924 *Women of the Ku Klux Klan Songbook* (Figure 8) or a 78 rpm recording of the Klan’s song “The Bright Fiery Cross” (Figure 9)
The Bright Fiery Cross
(Tune of The Old Rugged Cross)

All over the U. S. A. the fiery cross we display,
The emblem of Klansman's domain
We will be forever true to the Red, White and Blue
And Americans always remain.

To the Bright Fiery Cross, I will ever be true
All blame and reproach gladly bear
And friendship will show to each Klansman I know.
It's glory forever we'll share.

In the Bright Fiery Cross, a great beauty I see
As it shines its light so divine.
For the hope it will give may forever it live
To be loved by you and your's and me and mine.

Oh, the Bright Fiery Cross, despised by a few.
Has a wonderous attraction for me
And when Death calls me away to my home o'er the way
Then burn one Fiery Cross just for me.

So I'll cherish the Bright Fiery Cross,
Till from my duties at last I lay down,
Then burn for me a Bright Fiery Cross
The day I am laid in the ground.

Figure 8: Lyrics to The Bright Fiery Cross from the Women of the Ku Klux Klan Songbook (1924)
While seeing musical examples from these hate groups is powerful, students are even more shocked when they see racist imagery, titles, and lyrics in popular music of the late 19th and early 20th centuries. Some of the most offensive sheet music comes from a subcategory of minstrel songs very popular in the 1880s-1890s called coon songs, which featured racial stereotypes of African Americans. Sheet music covers featured exaggerated racist imagery of black people, and the lyrics often played up white stereotypes of blacks (Figure 10).

Figure 9: A recording of the Ku Klux Klan song *The Bright Fiery Cross*. 
Later, during the civil rights movement, groups like the Citizens Council urged white families to keep their children away from black music (Figure 11).

Figure 10: Sheet music illustrating the racist imagery found in early 20th century songs.
To balance this negative music and attitudes about certain types of music, curators play musical examples from the civil rights movement, using music to fight for integration and racial equality. Groups like SNCC and others made several recordings of freedom songs designed to uplift civil rights activist and help provide unity and courage in the face of oppression (Figure 12).

Figure 11: A flyer circulated by the Citizens’ Council of Greater New Orleans warning parents against letting their children purchase or listen to music by African American musicians.
Students are moved when they hear bluesman J. B. Lenoir sing about James Meredith getting shot as he lead the “March Against Fear” from Memphis to Jackson: “June the 6th, 1966, they shot James Meredith down just like a dog. Mr. President I wonder what are you gonna do now? I don’t believe you’re gonna do nothing at all” (Lenoir, 1966).

Conclusion

Upon entering college, many students have little knowledge of the civil rights history of the state. The curators strive to highlight collection formats and use of materials in research and projects, as well as provide some insight into the struggles that activists encountered in the 1960s. Civil rights activist and Mississippi Freedom Democratic Party leader Fannie Lou Hamer famously said, “I’m sick and tired of being sick and tired” (Hamer, 2011). When students leave Special Collections, the curators want them to know how to use our collections, but
just as important know a little bit more about the hardships African Americans encountered and the value of the struggle.
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