

Mississippi Burning

by Bill Matens (1969-1997)

*[Note: The summer of 1964 was a turning point in the civil rights movement, when three young civil-rights workers — Michael Schwerner, James Chaney and Andrew Goodman — were murdered in central Mississippi. The Mississippi Burning (MIBURN) case (so named because of the discovery of the civil-rights workers' burnt-out car that eventually led Agents to the murders) and subsequent trial exposed the activities of the Ku Klux Klan. One FBI informant in particular revealed the inner workings of the Klan, exposing many of its secrets and plans. Society member **Donald J. Cesare (1963-1985)** served in the Jackson Division's Meridian Resident Agency from 1965 to 1970 where he developed this important informant. Brian Hollstein (1967-1977) initially interviewed Cesare on Oct. 16, 2006, for the Oral History Heritage Project. In this article, Bill Matens uses that oral history interview to present the information from Cesare's perspective.]*

Before he joined the FBI, Don Cesare was a captain in the U.S. Marine Corps, served with the CIA as a security officer and later was a CIA paramilitary officer, for a total of six years. While in the FBI, Cesare was a police instructor, a SWAT team member and a bomb expert, as well as an instructor with the ICITAP Program in Central and South America. He served in the Dallas, Jackson and Denver Divisions.

For his second office assignment in 1965, Cesare reported to Special Agent in Charge Roy Moore in Jackson, MS (just a few months after the discovery of the bodies of the slain civil-rights workers). Moore assigned Cesare as one of five Agents in the Meridian Resident Agency. Cesare was responsible for Neshoba County, including Philadelphia, MS, which was a hot bed of the White Knights of the Ku Klux Klan of the Realm in Mississippi.

Cesare said that a key part of the MIBURN story was his relationship with informant and friend Delmar Dennis — a local member of the Lauderdale County Klavern in Mississippi and the most valuable informant in the



Don Cesare

Mississippi Klan. Inspector Joe Sullivan, who ran the MIBURN case, assigned Dennis to Cesare. Previously, two other Agents had approached Dennis and had succeeded in gaining his confidence. They told Sullivan of Dennis' potential as an informant prior to leaving Mississippi. The result was Cesare's lasting and productive association with Dennis.

Dennis had deserted the segregationist ranks after witnessing Klan violence and he questioned what the Klan was doing, especially when it had bombed a couple of churches in the area. In 1964, the Klan had bombed as many as 40 churches, primarily black or Mennonite churches.

Dennis was young, vibrant and charismatic with a photographic memory. He could remember nearly everything from a Klan rally, and also remembered license plate numbers, phone numbers and names. He was highly respected in "Klandom." He started out as a klagoro, a klavern-type religious leader, and evolved into a state grand klagoro, which sat at the right hand of Sam Bowers, the Imperial Wizard from Laurel, MS. Cesare recalled that Dennis was so trusted in the Klan that he served not only as a courier of Klan information but also as a distributor of Klan funds — both of which served the Bureau well.

While obtaining information from Dennis, Cesare

Witness Claims KKK H Okay to Slay 3 Civil Rig



FBI INFORMER—Meridian, Miss., preacher Delmar Dennis, right, the second paid FBI informer witness in the trial of 18 men on charges of conspiracy to slay Civil Rights workers, leaves the Federal Building in Meridian Thursday with FBI

asked him to relate the Klan's version of the civil-rights workers' murders. Although it was hearsay, Cesare wanted Dennis to be associated with this story. The killings and burial had taken place long before Cesare came to Mississippi and before Dennis became operational as an informant. Dennis explained the order that was given for the murder of the three workers, saying that it had originated from Sam Bowers and given to the Neshoba Klavern, headed by Edgar Ray Killen. Bowers used a logging-operation code (logging was prominent in the area). Dennis identified several of the Klan participants and provided information as told to him, which corroborated what the Bureau had developed through other sources.

According to Dennis' information, Edgar Ray Killen was the leader and responsible for arresting the workers, putting them in jail and keeping them there until the Lauderdale Klavern, the Meridian group, was notified. That group was told that upon the workers' release from jail, the Klansmen were to intercept the workers on a highway. According to Dennis, the Meridian group pulled the workers into a dirt road and shot them.

In his oral history interview, Cesare said that Dennis told him that the triggerman was someone named Roberts, the brother of a patrolman in Meridian. Cesare went on to say that Wayne Roberts was the one who confronted Schwerner and said, "Hey, you're that n****-lovin' s.o.b." Cesare added that Schwerner's last words were, "I know how you feel, sir." Roberts pulled out a gun and shot Schwerner. Roberts also shot Goodman, but Chaney was shot by James Jordan, who yelled, "Save one for me," before shooting Chaney as he tried to climb up an embankment.

Cesare said he paid Dennis well over the time that he worked him as an informant, close to a quarter-million dollars. During the MIBURN trial, Dennis took the stand in Judge Harold Cox' courtroom and related fascinating and accurate accounts of Klandom and its secret ways. The entire Klan in Mississippi was stunned and irrevocably shattered by his testimony.

After the MIBURN case, Dennis relocated to Santa Fe, NM, but later moved to Los Angeles. He was the subject of the book, *Klandestine*.

MISSING CALL FBI

THE FBI IS SEEKING INFORMATION CONCERNING THE DISAPPEARANCE AT PHILADELPHIA, MISSISSIPPI, OF THESE THREE INDIVIDUALS ON JUNE 21, 1964. EXTENSIVE INVESTIGATION IS BEING CONDUCTED TO LOCATE GOODMAN, CHANEY, AND SCHWERNER, WHO ARE DESCRIBED AS FOLLOWS:

	ANDREW GOODMAN	JAMES EARL CHANEY	NICHOLAS BERRY SCHWERNER
PHOTO			
RACE:	White	Negro	White
BOC:	Male	Male	Male
DOB:	November 23, 1942	May 19, 1943	November 6, 1939
POB:	New York City	Meridian, Mississippi	New York City
AGE:	21 years	21 years	25 years
HEIGHT:	5'8"	5'7"	5'9" to 5'10"
WEIGHT:	150 pounds	135 to 140 pounds	170 to 180 pounds
HAIR:	Dark brown, wavy	Black	Brown
EYES:	Brown	Brown	Light blue
TEETH:		Good, some missing	
SCARS AND MARKS:		1 back cut scar 2 inches above left ear.	Puckered center of forehead, slight scar on bridge of nose, approximately 1/2", below left eye.

SHOULD YOU HAVE OR IN THE FUTURE RECEIVE ANY INFORMATION CONCERNING THE WHEREABOUTS OF THESE INDIVIDUALS, YOU ARE REQUESTED TO NOTIFY ME OR THE NEAREST OFFICE OF THE FBI. TELEPHONE NUMBER IS LISTED BELOW.

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DIRECTOR
FEDERAL BUREAU OF INVESTIGATION
UNITED STATES DEPARTMENT OF JUSTICE
WASHINGTON, D. C. 20535
TELEPHONE, NATIONAL 9-7117

June 29, 1964



Civil rights workers' burned out car