by Doug Caulkins, Anthropology Department

The news of the recent conviction of former Klansman Edgar Ray Killen for his role in the slaying of the three civil rights workers, James Chaney, Andrew Goodman, and Michael Schwerner, in 1964 caused me to root through my desk drawer until I found my nearly forgotten issue of JET magazine from Aug. 20, 1964. On page 14 was a story about the discovery of the bodies of the three slain young men, their photos still fresh in my memory after 41 years. On page 9 was my own picture, shown speaking to the congregation in a black church in Fayette County, Tenn., where a team of Cornell University students and faculty had been invited to help with a voter registration and grass-roots leadership program before a county election for the key offices of sheriff and tax assessor. On the facing page was a picture of the local leader of the black residents, John McFerren, a businessman and the bravest man I have ever met. McFerren had survived being shot on two different occasions by members of the Ku Klux Klan. Elsewhere I saw the photo of the slain civil rights workers' car being pulled from a Mississippi pond. The juxtaposition of those photographs haunts me.

The news of the deaths of the three civil rights workers in Mississippi galvanized some of our Fayette County prospective poll watchers and other election workers: "If you folks can risk your lives to come down here to help us out, I am going to do my best to get people registered and get out the vote." That was the wrong motivation, of course, but we accepted it. We were living with danger only for the summer, but they had been living with it for their whole lives. While the national press focused on the murder of the three civil rights workers, little attention was paid to the drive-by shooting of a black child that week in a rural area of the county.

Many of our middle class contacts — schoolteachers and clerks — were afraid for their jobs if they openly participated in the election campaign. Many sharecroppers who tried to register to vote had been thrown off their land by the white landowners, precipitating the "tent city" of homeless would-be voters pictured in the Memphis Civil Rights Museum. At our first meeting as the civil rights workers gathered in rural Fayette County, a sharecropper family happened by, all of their possessions in a horse-drawn wagon, on their way to bunk with relatives after being thrown out of their home by the white landowner in retaliation for their attempt to register to vote. If there was any doubt why we were there, it was dispelled by the sight of fear, sadness, and despair on the face of the mother, clutching a small child to her bosom as she sat in the wagon that rolled slowly by.

This was America, right?

The first time that my wife and I drove to the county seat, Fayette, and parked in front of the drugstore, all of the people sitting at the soda fountain counter rushed to the front window to see the "northern agitators" in
person. Their stares were anything but welcoming. After the hostility of the town, it was a relief to drive back to the gravel roads that signaled that we had entered the black section of the county. We lived with a kind and slow-talking black farmer and his wife who had four acres of okra and a mule. Their modest home had no running water, but with the rent that we paid them they were able to make a down payment on a refrigerator.

We felt a constant tension driving on paved roads — white territory — since civil rights workers in our group had been shot at by passing cars. Our cars were well known in the county. Was the driver of that pickup coming toward us white or black? If white, roll up the car window with the naive hope that the glass might deflect a shotgun blast.

We lost the general election that summer of '64, but the grass-roots leadership of the county had been strengthened and extended and would triumph in subsequent years. Lorna and I felt a flood of emotion in the final meeting of the group when, clasping hands, we all sang "We Shall Overcome," with the firm conviction that we would, "some day."

Thirty-five years later we revisited Fayette County after touring the Civil Rights Museum in Memphis, where we silently viewed the display on the '64 tent city while docents explained the role of northern civil rights workers to a mostly attentive group of black schoolchildren. It seemed so long ago. We found our way to John McFerren's business on the outskirts of Fayette, which in 1964 was a busy gas station, café, and nerve center for the local civil rights movement. Now it was virtually unrecognizable: no restaurant and no gas pumps, only a few cigarette and soda vending machines attended by a wizened old man, John McFerren. We reintroduced ourselves and talked about the events of the intervening years. No one paid much attention to John any longer.

The younger members of the black community were satisfied, he said, with their increased affluence and didn't feel the need for any kind of civil rights organization. No, he hadn't seen the Civil Rights Museum, although he did drive into Memphis for supplies every week.

We took some photos of John posing with us and drove back into Fayette for lunch. The drugstore where we had parked in 1964 was now an antique store and tea shop. We admired the antiques, ordered a light lunch, and chatted with the friendly white owners. While troubled that John was not happy, we were feeling positive about the changes in the past 35 years. Then our genial hosts confided that they were not from Fayette originally, but had moved from Memphis, which was turning into a black city. Now Memphis even had a black mayor, they reported with disgust. Our sense of well-being evaporated as we paid our bill and left.

If not now, some day. This is America, right?