

WHATEVER HAPPENED TO THE SOUTHERN VILLAINS

by James Reston, Jr.

It was not in Selma, but in the North Alabama town of Ft. Payne where I finally found Jim Clark. The search had taken me over a month tracking him from Alabama to North Carolina, Tennessee to Florida, and by the time I saw him across the Holiday Inn Restaurant, I knew enough, maybe too much, about his life since 1968 to make my approach very comfortable. There was no doubt that this was Jim Clark, the Jim Clark. He sat alone, with his profile to me, displaying that large head with its flattened boxer's nose, that was fixed in my mind from 1965, when I had seen him with his military helmet liner pulled the correct two fingers from his nose, or standing amid a few posse members, cattle prods dangling from their belts. His hair was greying now. He wore glasses, and there was no button on his lapel reading Never! but there was no mistaking that profile.

Unlike 1965, my task in Fort Payne was history. With all the sentimentality over Jimmy Carter, the endless words about the brassy New South and the end of the Civil War, what had happened to the Southern villains of the Sixties? Had Jim Clark of Selma, L.A. Rainey and Cecil Price of Neshoba County, Laurie Pritchett of Albany, Georgia, and Bull Connor of Birmingham become outcasts in this New South? Were they still in law enforcement? How did they see their place in history, and did they realize in retrospect how much the Civil Rights movement had needed them?

I delivered my dignified, rehearsed introduction to Clark haltingly. A professor at a Southern university, I had written a book on the Joan Little case in which the image of the Southern law man intrigued me. I proposed to interview

him for a Southern oral history project. He invited me to sit down. He did not ask if I was a member of the "liberal press" which he had been steadfastly avoiding for nine years. He did not ask how I had found him, not that I would have admitted that the FBI helped. Nor did he ask if I knew anything about his life since 1968, not that I would have told him about two Alabama prosecutors of his with whom I had talked. Instead we talked about the caricature of the Southern lawman which had emerged in the 1970s, particularly through the work of the Dodge Motor Company and its Dodge safety sheriff, Joe Higgins. Joe Higgins was a friend of Clark's, it turned out, and the caricature had been based on a deputy in the Dallas County sheriff's department in the 1950s.

"Anytime you laugh at a caricature, it's because you see something human in it, something of yourself in it," Clark said, "If you can't laugh, you're in trouble." The comment seemed forced, but we were on our way. So we talked about how the town of Selma had obtained federal funds since 1965, arguing it deserved special attention because of its racial troubles in the past, how the new \$2.6 million Selma Municipal Complex had been 70% funded by the Federal Government.

"That's like the old World War II song about crawling in the sand and working for the Yankee dollar," Clark said.

Jim Clark's credentials to be Sheriff of Dallas County were part military and part political. He had been a lieutenant colonel in the Second World War, and had competed against General George Patton in war games in the Louisiana Swamps. In the 1954 campaign of "Kissin' Jim Folsom, Clark coordinated an eleven-county area, and when Folsom was elected, he appointed Clark an assistant commissioner of revenue. In 1956, Clark was at the Democratic National Convention as floor manager for Happy Chandler and remembers how "Eleanor Roosevelt pushed that governor of Illinois with his elevator shoes and lipstick." In 1957, the sheriff of Dallas County died, and Folsom appointed Clark to the post.

So for a time after his defeat for reelection in 1966 as sheriff of Dallas County, when he was an international figure, Clark continued in politics. For three years he lectured for the John Birch Society traveling to 38 states and 400 campuses. Once he spoke in the McCormack Auditorium in Chicago, and the crowd was so large in the afternoon, the managers invited him to speak in the evening as well. When there was a bomb threat, "they blamed me the next morning for giving such a fiery speech." His advance sheet read:

He attempted to restore and maintain order during the influx of thousands of White and Negro beatniks, revolutionaries, and "weekend" clergymen into Selma. Bearing out the oft-stated fact that local law enforcement agencies are a private target of Communist agitation, Clark and his men were attacked repeatedly. . . . By use of Pavlovian techniques employed on a nation-wide basis, an image has been created and instilled in the public consciousness of "Jim Clark" as being a rednecked racist who embodies everything evil in the South. . . .

After considering briefly a race for the governorship, Clark's last dabbling in politics came in 1968 when he ran against Bull Connor, the Police Commissioner in the Birmingham race riot of 1963. The post in contention in 1968 was the presidency of the Alabama Public Service Commission, which regulates state utilities. But Jim Clark thought his friend, Bull Connor, was being used in the election, and so evidently did Bull Connor's sister. She paid Jim Clark's qualifying fee for the election. "He was partly paralysed with saliva dribbling out of his mouth," Clark said. So Clark didn't campaign in the final three weeks, and Connor won the election. In 1973, Bull Connor died.

Since 1968, Jim Clark dropped from sight, working hard at anonymity, covering his tracks diligently, and leaving orders with associates not to tell anybody about his whereabouts, particularly "the liberal press." Actually, Clark was skipping around the South in a number of financial ventures, some of which were questionable. In 1969-70, he operated as a broker for the Tangible Risk Insurance Company in Birmingham, Alabama, supposedly backed by assets in

the Bank of Sark. Sark is a British Island in the North Sea with a population of 560, and the Bank of Sark turned out to be several rooms over a tavern. In 1971, along with eight other men, Clark was indicted for mail fraud in the scheme. His attorney requested that his case be severed from that of his alleged co-conspirators, telling the court that peremptory challenges would have to be made against negro jurors that might have heard of Clark. But it never came to that. Though Clark plead nolo contendere, the judge declared him innocent. The prosecutor felt that Jim Clark was being used. . . again. In fact, Clark had been paid his broker fee with a check on the Bank of Sark.

In 1973, Clark was in North Carolina as the general manager of the Pinehurst Mortgage and Loan Company, a firm offering 9½% unsecured loans and started with \$7500 worth of capital. With a slick presentation and widespread television and newspaper ads, the mortgage company became quickly known. But Clark was fired after six months for an "unwise investment," and a year after that was charged with embezzlement of \$2800 by the company officers. Those charges were dropped in late 1975 when the same officers had more serious problems. In April, 1976, Pinehurst Mortgage and Loan ran afoul of securities laws and went into bankruptcy. The president of the company had already been convicted of fraud in a similar mortgage and loan fleece in Mississippi.

Clark stayed on in North Carolina in the real estate business and in 1975 was leaving a business card with Selma's mayor, Joe Smitherman, identifying him as secretary-treasurer of Timberland Properties, Ltd. of Southern Pines, North Carolina. But Smitherman described the card as a phony when he gave it to me last year, and the Southern Pines Chamber of Commerce had never heard of Timberland Properties.

In 1976, Clark was back in the Sand Mountain area of North Alabama, operating in the fast buck climate of coal brokerage in DeKalb County. In partnership with two others, he was an officer of International Coal and

Mineral---"ICM, like the intercontinental missile," Clark joked. I knew all of the foregoing when I approached Jim Clark in the Holiday Inn in Fort Payne. What I did not know (but might have suspected) was that he was again riding the line of illegality. In October last year, Clark's partner in ICM George Mills, was indicted for embezzlement in the classic style of North Alabama coal shysters and was due to stand trial this September. The complaint said Mills had taken orders for coal, converted checks for it to his own use, and never paid the miner.

"George Mills and Jim Clark pretty well fit the mold of the quick buck shysters around here," said the DeKalb county prosecutor, Richard Igou.

Meanwhile, Clark absconded with a car he hadn't paid for, and a Fort Payne State patrolman searched him out in Mobile with a warrant for a stolen car. With the recovery of that ICM car and another, charges against Clark were not pressed (though they are still pending). In August of this year, Clark was said to be back in the coal business in Brentt, Alabama.

When Jim Clark's mind centers on Selma 1965, the bitterness pours out. The words are quiet, seem so with a considerable effort at control. His hands tremble, as he recalls "the wall to wall mattresses in the condemned section of Selma without any sanitation," the dispensing of birth control pills to the Yankee arrivees, and the use of LSD in his jail. He remembers Martin Luther King as a coward and a liar, who broke a lot of laws and caused more disrespect for the law than "any person in history." He scoffs at Sammy Davis, Jr., flying into Selma for a day, appearing on the Johnny Carson Show the next night, talking about Jim Clark and his big black cigar, "and I don't smoke. Don't even like to be around people who do." He bridles at what he sees as press distortions: how the press turned Wilson Baker, the Selma Safety Director, into a "knight in shining armor" and him into a goat, how Newsweek printed a

picture making it look as if he was striking a civil rights worker, when actually he was taking a night stick away from her. He points to the scar on his finger where she bit him in that altercation.

"A friend of mine sent me a bottle of Adolf's Meat Tenderizer the next morning, said, if I was going to let people chew on me like that, the least I could do was make myself more tasty."

On the day of the charge by mounted state police and sheriff's posse at the Edmund Pettus Bridge on March 9, 1965, Clark had been away in Washington, D.C. appearing on "Issues and Answers." He arrived back in Selma just as "King's professionals" were coming across the bridge. The Governor, not he, was the chief authority, Clark is quick to point out. And when the horse-men charged the professionals, the marchers fell flat, Clark remembers, and then "they rose up with knives, icepicks, and razors."

Jim Clark only regrets that he lost his temper a few times. In particular, he allowed himself to be provoked one time by C.T. Vivian, a King lieutenant.

"Vivian was there with several hundred demonstrators," Clark recalls, "and I was standing at the top of the courthouse steps, with my nightstick under my arm. I had only about six deputies behind me, was waiting for reinforcements, and trying to stall for time. Vivian kept haranguing me, calling me a Hitler and a brute. A television strobe light came on me full face, and I said, 'Put out that light or I'll shoot it out.' At that point, Vivian grabbed my stick under my arm.

"Well, I'd heard the expression 'seeing red' all my life, and never knew what it meant, though it was like a red cape in a bull's ring. It looked like a red glaze came over my eyes, and I hauled off and hit him. He went tumbling backward down twenty-one steps. I saw him down on the street and wondered how he got there. Back in the courthouse someone said,

"'You sure knocked hell out of him. I didn't know you had such a left.' I couldn't remember hitting him, but my knuckle hurt like hell. I went to the

doctor and found I had a linear fracture from the joint to the knuckle. That night on television, I saw me hit him."

The punch that splattered the name of Selma around the world.

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In the lore of the Civil Rights era, Neshoba County, Mississippi, stands alone as the paradigm of Klan dominated, backwoods terror, and its sheriff in 1964, L.A. Rainey, and his deputy, Cecil Ray Price, the epitome of mean, racist rule. Rainey and Price, along with 16 others were charged with conspiracy to deny the civil rights of James Chaney, Michael Schwerner, and Andrew Goodman, the three activists murdered in Neshoba County in 1964 and discovered buried in an earth-fill dam. On the testimony of two paid FBI informants, who testified that Deputy Price delivered the three civil rights workers to the Klan for elimination on the night of June 21, 1964, Price was convicted and sentenced to six years in the Federal Penitentiary. He served four years in Sandstone, Minnesota, and was released in January, 1974.

But Rainey was acquitted. His name was mentioned only once in the trial-- by an informant, paid \$400 who put Rainey at a Klan meeting several days before. It is generally believed that Rainey was indicted on the hope that the FBI would uncover damaging evidence against him as the investigation proceeded, rather than on probable cause to believe that Rainey was involved in the plot. So the ex-sheriff says his reputation is undeserved.

When Rainey pleads, as he did to me in his lawyer's office in Jackson, Mississippi, that he has suffered needlessly since 1958, it would seem prudent for him to distinguish his situation from that of his former deputy. But since 1964, Rainey and Price have repeatedly joined together in one suit after another against various media, thus prolonging the impression that they are a team. In 1964, the two sued NBC for a news story about law enforcement in

Neshoba County, asking \$1 million in damages. (Dismissed) In 1966, the two sued author William Bradford Huie for \$3 million over their portrayal in the author's book, Three Lives for Mississippi. They did recover several thousand dollars in a settlement of the case, and seeing a good thing, turned around and signed a release with Huie for a film (never made) based on Huie's book. Huie paid Rainey and Price \$6000 each in 1968 for the right to portray their characters and personalities in any way he "deemed appropriate."

Also in 1968, Rainey sued Time Magazine for an article implying that the former sheriff was a Klan sympathizer. The sheriff claimed the article to be "libelous, scandalous, and slanderous," but the suit was dismissed a year later, when Rainey's presence at Klan meetings was established. Rainey to this day explains his presence at Klan meetings as discharging his duty as sheriff "to see what was going on," but that doesn't seem to cover a 1965 Klan meeting in Greenville, Mississippi, 180 miles away from Neshoba County, where Rainey and Price appeared in uniform and were officially introduced by the Imperial Wizard. Nor does it explain his appearance at a Klan meeting in 1975 near Gulfport, Mississippi, which Rainey admitted in a recent deposition.

The most recent episode of this alternation between revenge and exploitation arises from a four-hour television dramatization of the Neshoba County case entitled "Attack on Terror: the FBI versus the Ku Klux Klan." The film premiered in 1975 and reran on CBS this past August. In the movie the sheriff of "Sayville" is portrayed by a thin, diminutive actor, quite a contrast to Rainey's 6'6" hulk. True, the sheriff rolls his own cigarette quaintly (in contrast to Rainey's habit of chewing Red Man). Once the sheriff calls the search for the missing activists "a publicity stunt," and he is generally nasty to FBI agents. But he is never associated with the actual killing in the film. The deputy sheriff, however, splendidly played by Ned Beatty, has a far more important role.

Four months after the original airing of the film in 1975, Lawrence Rainey, joined once again with Cecil Price and represented by the same lawyer, sued CBS for \$1.5 million in damages. Rainey argued that since the trial in 1967, he "enjoyed a priceless, untarnished, unblemished, and unassailable reputation," but the film brought him into "disastrous scandal, ridicule, and professional disrepute," and "defamed, slandered, libeled, degenerated, low-rated, belittled, and defiled" the plaintiff's "good name." That seemed to cover all bases. Cecil Ray Price was more modest, given his ex-con status. He asked only \$750,000 in damages, not so much because "Attack on Terror" low-rated his good name, but that it invaded his privacy. In October of last year, the suit was dismissed summarily. The judge said the plaintiff's privacy was not invaded since they were public officials in an event of international interest, and books, movies, and plays about historical events are protected by the First Amendment, the same as news stories. The fact that Rainey and Price had sold their reputations for \$6000 once before didn't help their case much either.

Still one must admire their perseverance. After the August rerun of "Attack on Terror," Rainey and Price again sued in Federal Court for \$1 million each in damages. Their joint lawyer, James McIntyre of Jackson, says he's got a personal interest in the case. McIntyre was portrayed in "Attack on Terror" by George Grizzard, and said McIntyre,

"He doesn't look anything like me."

Slumped in a chair in McIntyre's office, his cowboy hat beside him revealing only a few grey bristles on his balding head, his ill-fitting false teeth clicking as he spoke, Lawrence Rainey laid out his difficulties in the past nine years.

"I've suffered more than the people who were convicted and sent to jail. Everyone of them who went up and served time came back and got better jobs than me."

After his acquittal and retirement from the sheriff's job, Rainey was denied a position on the Philadelphia, Mississippi, police department, but he was hired as a policeman in Franklin, Kentucky, his wife's hometown, until the NAACP heard about it. According to Rainey, "some big NAACP leaders from New York and Washington" flew into Franklin (pop. 10,000) and turned the case into a cause celebre. So the ex-sheriff graciously withdrew his application to save Franklin the pain of demonstrations. He ended up a Ford mechanic in Franklin for 4½ years. Upon his return to Mississippi in 1972, he worked as a mobile home mechanic before he was denied a job as a security man at the Parchman State Penitentiary. True to form, Rainey sued the state for "reverse discrimination" but it came to nothing. When "Attack on Terror" appeared on television in 1975, he was working as a security guard at a food store in Meridian, Mississippi, at close to the minimum wage. But the store received bomb threats over the weekend after the movie was aired, and Rainey was fired. Now he's back with another private security firm.

The rules of my talk with Rainey prohibited any discussion of the details of the 1964 murders, because Rainey and his lawyer were negotiating with a New York writer to do a book; and if there was any money in the article I was doing, McIntyre said, "we want a cut of it." But I doubted that the "New York writer" would find any grand tale of expiation or enlightenment in Rainey. To me, Rainey wondered,

"What's the difference of the whites having some sort of organization, and the blacks having some sort? The whites have their Klan, John Birch Society, White Citizens Council, and the FBI hassles and tears 'em up, but doesn't bother the NAACP."

As I went to take a picture of Rainey after the interview, the attorney, James McIntyre, urged Rainey to put on his cowboy hat and asked if he didn't have some Red Man with him.

Up in Philadelphia, in the baked sanguine earth of the Choctaw country of East Central Mississippi, I found Cecil Ray Price, driving a gasoline truck, making \$150 a week. His face has drooped since the days of his notoreity: the bags under his eyes, obscrued that day by wrap-around sun glasses, have enlarged and darkened, his double chins are more commodious. In justice to Price's position, it is impossible for the observer to separate Price's dull liquid stare from the actor Ned Beatty's portrayal, and to wash the sound of gun shots out of one's mind.

Like Rainey, Price's current preoccupation is the movie, and yet one senses that he is going through the motions. Before the movie, Price told me, support was building for him to run again for sheriff of Neshoba County (he came in third in the 1968 race to succeed Rainey after he had been convicted and his case was on appeal), but the film quashed that. (Rainey, too, has been approached about running again for sheriff.) The Neshoba County attorney told Price that there is no legal bar to him seeking local office.

In a deposition for his suit against CBS, Price asserted that "Attack on Terror" portrayed the participants in the conspiracy as "illiterate and backwoods. It tried to run everyone down. It upset me." But the effect of the film on his eleven-year-old son upset Price the most. Sitting near his gasoline truck in a dusty lot in Philadelphia, Price said,

"I didn't plan for him to find out in this way. When he reached the proper age, I would try to explain to him what happened. Those kids would ask him in the school yard, did he know his father kills people? Did he know his father has been in jail."

"You know how vicious kids can be."

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Laurie Pritchett, the chief of police in Albany, Georgia, from 1961-64, is often coupled together with Jim Clark and Bull Connor as the dread and evil symbols of white tyranny in the South of the sixities, but Pritchett bristles at being placed in that company. The Albany movement in 1961 is generally regarded as Martin Luther King's worst defeat, and Pritchett, the smartest of King's symbolic adversaries. The Chief's tactics were mass arrests, the control of white racists, and amiable relations with the press, and if Pritchett's success in preventing violence in Albany had not been followed by the cattle prods, firehoses, and earth fill dams of other places, most analysts believe the equal rights legislation might have been a lot longer in coming. But Pritchett's real success was that he was not a credible villain.

The Chief is retired now, and retired early, at the age of 50. He left Albany in 1965 to become the Chief of Police in High Point, N.C., the furniture capital of the country and a dry town, where the town elders wanted to be sure no racial trouble upset the business boom. During his tenure, the city of Seattle tried to hire him away as its police chief, but Pritchett didn't want to leave the South. After eight years as High Point's chief, petty politics rather than racial troubles finally did him in. The Mayor of the town pushed an investigation of alleged improprieties in the police department, including the charge that Pritchett wasn't tough enough on drinkers at the annual furniture convention, and the Chief resigned, his health broken, with a paralysed diaphragm from the tension.

Pritchett is a blockbuster of a man: a neckless head atop massive shoulders that taper to a tiny waist, muscle Beach style, blond wavy hair that was close cropped and military in Albany. Stripped to the waist and beat red from the sun, Pritchett talked to me at his summer retreat called "Seldom Rest" in South Mont, N.C. Seldom Rest is a modest cinderblock house on the side of a man-made lake, and even it became part of Pritchett's final downfall. "After

28 years in law enforcement, recognized all over the United States for my ability, honesty, and integrity, they say I'm corrupt because I own a lake house. It's a hell of a way to end a career."

Pritchett looks back on the struggle in Albany with evident pleasure. He keeps stacks of clippings and pictures from the three-year movement (displayed in his den, but not in his office), and says he's glad to have been part of that era of history. Martin Luther King and his lieutenants were his "close personal friends"--Albany was simply a clash of means to Pritchett--and he would have gone to King's funeral if rioting had not broken out in High Point after King's assassination. Each year, Laurie Pritchett cherishes his Christmas card from Coretta King.

When King began to focus on Albany, Pritchett set about studying the crusader's philosophy. From Ghandi's march to the sea, he saw King's approach as overpowering by mass arrest, packing the jails, and he knew his jail facilities were limited. So Pritchett trained his men harshly on resisting provocation, and he devised a plan to ship prisoners out to surrounding jails, without ever putting a single prisoner in Albany. The sheriffs of the surrounding counties as far away as 70 miles were glad to cooperate, and before King arrived, Pritchett had the capability to house 10,000 prisoners outside of town. When King came personally to Albany, Pritchett would meet him in Americus and drive him the last 40 miles personally in a squad car.

Pritchett claims now that he never believed Albany should be segregated and calls the public accommodations law a "good bill" that he was glad to see passed. It was strictly a matter of law enforcement.

"We didn't differ in what they wanted, but in the means Dr. King took. He said the legal route cost too much money and was too time consuming. I said, 'All right, doctor, you're drawing lines now. You're telling me that you're going to take to the streets in defiance of the law. If you do this, I'll

have to arrest you. I'm telling you to go to court, get an injunction to stop us from enforcing an illegal law, if it is illegal. It won't take long. If it's not a good law, it will be overruled, and you'll be on your way.

"I'm not going to the courts,' King replied.

"Then you're going into the streets.'

"That's true.'

"Then we're going to meet in the streets,'" Pritchett remembers saying "and that's the way it was. They wanted to do something that just couldn't be done."

After King left Albany, he was at his lowest ebb, Pritchett told me. "He was defeated. He'd spent all that money in Albany for nothing, and he had to make a fresh start, so he went to Birmingham. Later he told the national press that in Albany, he had been out-nonviolent (sic)."

A year after King pulled out of Albany, a rumor circulated that he would return, and Pritchett went to Montgomery to see about it. "Andy Young took me to him in a house out in the country. Martin told me, 'Don't you listen to anybody. I don't have anything to come to Albany for. I didn't even like to hear the word, Albany.' That night, I was driving back home, listening to the radio. King had had a march, and that was the night when the sheriff's posse in Montgomery came out on horses, riding up on porches bullwhipping people."

In the spring of 1963 as Birmingham heated up, Bull Connor dispatched his Chief of Police, Jamie Moore, to Albany to observe Pritchett's tactics, and when things got really hot in April of that year, Connor sent for Pritchett, offering him "an outrageous sum" to go to Birmingham as an adviser. The Chief was hesitant, but the Albany City Council urged him to go.

His stay was short. In the first days of May 1963, Bull Connor turned firehoses on demonstrators and brought out police dogs, boasting to the press that dogs were more humane than guns. On May 12, 1963, the Klan met in Bessemmer, Alabama, and openly planned Birmingham bombings.

"I told Connor, look here, the Klan says they're going to blow this man (King) up. You ought to put a guard on him."

"I don't give a damn if they do blow him up. Don't care what they do. I'm not going to protect him," Connor replied.

"OK, Mr. Connor," Pritchett replied, "tomorrow I'll catch the first plane out, because you're wasting my time. . . . That night they blew up King's motel, and every police car they had in Birmingham got torn up. I left. I didn't have anything in common with Bull Connor."

Laurie Pritchett became something of a darling to law enforcement officials after 1963. Robert Kennedy, the attorney general, invited him to Washington for a week and tried to hire him as a federal trouble shooter. "People in the South respect you, and they'll do what you say," Kennedy said, but Pritchett didn't want to be a "turncoat."

What would "his people" do if the public accommodations bill were passed, Kennedy wanted to know.

"You're asking me about my people, attorney," Pritchett remembers saying. "If you mean my people in Albany, Georgia, we'll abide by it. If you're asking me what the South will do--Birmingham, Selma, Montgomery, these places-- I don't know what they'll do."

Later, in 1964, as King prepared to descend on Selma, Robert Kennedy would say to Wilson Baker, the Selma Public Safety director and Jim Clark's knight-errant,

"You know, if you're smart enough, you can beat King at his own game."  
It didn't turn out that way.