

The Journey of a Local Civil Rights Activist

Hillsider, Duluth, January 2013



Photo by Sam Alvar

In 1996, Sue Sojourner moved into the city of Duluth and packed among her personal belongings were photographs and hand written accounts of the years she spent with her husband, Henry Lorenzi, in Holmes County, Mississippi. During the Civil Rights Era, She had taken over 1,000 images, vivid historical documentation of the day. "It was a dangerous time", Sojourner says, "the photos show scary realities", of people fighting against racism.

1999 brought the creation of an exhibit out of an interest in the photographs, from Martin DeWitt – then, the Director of the University of Minnesota Duluth's (UMD) Tweed Museum of Art. The depictions of Fannie Lou Hamer, Bernice Patton Montgomery and other Civil Rights activists were shown locally prior to a multi state

tour. The photos are an intricate part of the story of the poverty, the cruelty and the struggle Sojourner has captured in, "Thunder of Freedom: Black Leadership and the Transformation of 1960's Mississippi."

Sue was born Susan Harris Sadoff and spent her formative years in Nashville, Tennessee. The family moved around the country and with

the move to California, Sue met Henry and eventually graduated from Berkeley. The year was 1964 and the Civil Rights consciousness that had begun in 1955 had intensified, gaining social and political power. "My husband and I knew that we wanted to be a part of the Civil Rights Movement", Sojourner said, "but we knew we wanted to join for more than a summer".

The couple traveled to Mississippi where, in Holmes County, Black leadership had founded the Mississippi Freedom Democratic Party organized to establish political representation and voting rights. A Holmes County movement sought to integrate the public schools. Sojourner describes Black parents having to sit their children down and explain to them that the white people may call them names, spit on them and hit

them, as they entered the school buildings.

1966 marked the shooting of James Meredith, the first Black student to attend the University of Mississippi. Martin Luther King Jr. had organized the Voter's Rights March. Rather than being discouraged by the shooting, more people were called to continue the march with the focus on Voter's Rights. Sue was among the crowds of protesters tear gassed by police trying to disperse the crowd. During the "Meredith March" – which lasted 21 days the phrase "Black Power" was used, chanted and popularized.

By 1972, Sue and Henry had decided to leave Mississippi and had begun their respective careers. Upon the arrival of their son, the couple as supporters of the Feminist Movement changed the family name to Sojourner. "It seemed right to have the name of a Black woman that stood for freedom", Sojourner said.

In the words of slain Civil Rights leader Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. there are times when "to remain silent is betrayal". Sue Sojourner has not remained silent, she has used her voice, she has shouted with her pictures and with her words. She chronicles her experiences in Holmes County, in her book "Thunder of Freedom: Black Leadership and the transformation of 1960's Mississippi", scheduled for publication early in 2013.

Publishing: University Press of Kentucky
By T.A. Jenkins