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Sojourner traveled a perilous road for freedom

Robin Washington column: If you've gotten to know Sue Sojourner since her move to Duluth in the late 1990s, you're probably aware of her civil rights work in Mississippi.

By: [Robin Washington](#), Duluth News Tribune

If you've gotten to know Sue Sojourner since her move to Duluth in the late 1990s, you're probably aware of her civil rights work in Mississippi. She may have shared her photographs of black residents of Holmes County or read their stories in one of her essays.

But only a true appreciation of those times reveals the dangers she faced then, as a newlywed and freshly minted University of California-Berkeley grad, deciding to head south at the height of the civil rights movement.

"We got married June 10. It was June 21 they got murdered," she said of Andrew Goodman, James Chaney and Michael Schwerner, three civil rights workers whose bodies were found in an earthen dam in Neshoba County, Miss., a little more than an hour's drive from Holmes County, where she and her husband were headed.

"It was scary but we weren't turning back," she said last week. "We knew that it was very possible that one of us and lots of other people could get killed."

Almost 50 years later, the journey of Sue and Henry Lorenzi (the couple adopted "Sojourner" after later travels) is told in "Thunder of Freedom: Black leadership and the transformation of 1960s Mississippi" (University of Kentucky Press). Cribbed from Sojourner's contemporaneous notes, tape recordings and various ephemera and co-written with Cheryl Reitan of the University of Minnesota Duluth, the book chronicles the Lorenzis' five-year stint as white workers fighting for black citizenship rights.

Before they got there, though, they traveled the country to visit friends and relatives, including her sister and brother-in-law, Muriel and Richard Abram, in Duluth.

"We were pretty worried about them. Their plan seemed kind of loose," Muriel Abram recalled.

Growing up in a Jewish family in Chicago with frequent visits to their mother's hometown of Nashville, Abram says she was familiar with segregation, as well as stories dominating the news of those challenging it.

"We were very proud of her," she said. "We gave them some stuff that we thought they might need."

Others also contributed, advice as well as tangible goods — including a suggestion that Henry shave his beard, which he did their first morning in Holmes County.

"I cried," Sojourner writes. "He didn't look at all like the man who had made love to me the previous night."

Personal moments aside, the Lorenzis are background characters. The true heroes of the book, and movement, are the black Mississippians themselves. Some are well-known in civil rights movement circles, such as Fannie Lou Hamer and Lawrence Guyot, leaders in the Mississippi Freedom Democratic Party's bid to break the stronghold of white segregationist Democrats. NAACP lawyer and Childrens Defense Fund founder Marian Wright Edelman also figures in the book, as does a brief encounter with Martin Luther King Jr. during another flashpoint following the shooting of James Meredith, the first black student at the University of Mississippi.

But the real stars are lesser-known, everyday folk, such as Hartman Turnbow, a barrel-chested farmer and one of Holmes County's "First Fourteen" blacks to attempt to register to vote, only to be denied by ridiculous tests. Rewarded for his efforts by night riders and the firebombing of his house, Turnbow — not beholden to the nonviolence of King's marches — responded by grabbing his rifle and shooting back.

Shooting back in a different way was Bernice Patton Montgomery, a science and math teacher who, when told in order to register she had to recite the entire Constitution, returned and did precisely that, becoming the county's first black woman registered voter.

Through it all, the Lorenzis offered support, including running a community center where the county's Head Start program originated. And with appeals from Sue, Duluth pitched in, too.

"They raised some money, collected clothing, collected food, collected books, collected things that people could use and drove a truck to Mississippi and then gave it to us," Sojourner says of a shipment documented in the April 2, 1965, Duluth News Tribune.

"There were huge boxes of mushroom chow mein from Chung King," adds Abram. "There were also a couple of women from the temple who sent her a check every month."

Though slow, change did come, with Congress passing the 1965 Voting Rights Act and Holmes County electing Mississippi's first black state legislator since Reconstruction two years later. But by then, the movement's complexion was changing, too, as the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee voted to expel white members and change its "Nonviolent" to "National" in an assertion of Black Power.

While relocating herself further into the background, Sojourner embraced that call

while relegating herself further into the background, Sojourner embraced that call.

"I don't know what Black Power means to you," she wrote in a letter to supporters. "To us it has seemed like an especially good, much-needed concept of cultural pride. ... Daily, people react, relate, accept and agree with us, not because we are right, but because we're white. We reinforce, by the mere existence of our white skin, the Negroes' lack of confidence."

They stayed for two more years. How did it turn out? I'll direct you to the book. Or listen to Sue herself, now 71, in her readings and presentations of scores of photos from that place and time.

And know the dangers she endured.

Robin Washington is editor of the News Tribune. He may be reached at rwashington@duluthnews.com.

If you go

Readings from "Thunder of Freedom" with Sue Sojourner and Cheryl Reitan.

Also: Shauna JeMai Ames, daughter of Holmes County leader Zelma Williams Croom.

At Sarah's Table/Chester Creek Café

7-9 p.m. Feb. 17

902 E. 8th St., Duluth

Mixed Blood Theatre

6:30-8:30 p.m. Feb. 24

1501 S. 4th St., Minneapolis

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Sue Sojourner



Sue (Lorenzi) Sojourner at home in Duluth. (Mike Creger / mcreger@duluthnews.com)
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