

## Duluth News Tribune

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### Duluthian publishes book about fight for black voting rights

"I knew I was going to write something" about working in the civil rights movement, says Duluth's Sue Sojourner, but she didn't know it would take more than four decades to become the book that landed on shelves in the past month.

By: [Budgeteer News](#), Duluth Budgeteer News

Sue Sojourner sits at a table in her Washington Studios apartment and asks her visitor if he knows anything about the pregnancy process.

She had been talking about her new book, "Thunder of Freedom," culled from her five years as a civil rights worker in 1960s Mississippi documented in journals, photography, and archiving.

"I knew I was going to write something," she said, but didn't know it would take more than four decades to become the book that landed on shelves in the past month.

"I gestated for 46 years," she said.

Her doula was Cheryl Reitan of the University of Minnesota Duluth, a fellow member of the Lake Superior Writers Group who had heard Sojourner read the group excerpts from her Mississippi diaries.

One was about driving across the country with her new husband in 1964 from California before heading south to visit relatives. Those included her sister and brother-in-law, Muriel and Richard Abram, in Duluth.

"We were very proud of her," Muriel Abram said last week, adding that they were worried as well. "Their plan seemed kind of loose."

It was also dangerous. The month their trip began, the bodies of three civil rights workers — Andrew Goodman, James Cheney and Michael Schwerner — were found in an earthen dam in Neshoba County, Miss. It was a little more than an hour's drive from Holmes County, where Sue and Henry Lorenzi (the couple would change their name to Sojourner after later travels) were headed.

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

The Lorenzis are background characters. The true heroes of the book, and movement, are the black Mississippians themselves, such as Hartman Turnbow, a barrel-chested farmer and one of Holmes County's "First Fourteen" 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 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 she had to recite the Constitution in order to register, returned and did precisely that, becoming the county's first black female registered voter.

"All of us in the room just gasped," Reitan said of the stories told in Sojourner's readings. She said she knew there was a book there and pushed to get it done.

Reitan found some grants that allowed Sojourner to get an assistant — "it turned out to be me" — and also volunteered many writing and editing hours.

"I told her those first four diary entries were gold," she said. "We got to the file cabinets and that was gold."

Though frightening, the Holmes County movement saw success, most demonstrably in the 1967 election of Mississippi's first black state legislator since Reconstruction.

Throughout it all, the Lorenzis offered support, in running a community center where the county's Head Start program originated, and in countless other ways.

Duluth also pitched in.

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

Adds Abram: "There were huge boxes of mushroom chow mein from Chung King. I guess we know who that was from. There were also a couple of women from the temple who sent her a check every month."

Sojourner's husband died of a heart attack in 1982. She moved to Duluth in the late 1990s and began showing her photos and artifacts from Mississippi, mounting exhibits at the Washington Studios space, the Tweed Museum and other venues.

The book was picked up by the second publisher that saw it. In the readings she gives to groups, Sojourner stresses that she's not the main character.

"I didn't want to read about 'me, me, me, me, me,'" she says. "I wanted to read about 'them, them, them, them, them.'"

#### Meet the authors

"Thunder of Freedom: Black Leadership and the Transformation of 1960s Mississippi" (University Press of Kentucky) was written by Sue [Lorenzi] Sojourner with Cheryl Reitan. They will take part in two promotional events this month, one in Duluth and one in Minneapolis. Soul food will be on the lunch and dinner menu at Chester Creek Cafe Feb. 17. Reservations are recommended. The events will include readings and signings and special guest Shauna JëMai Ames, daughter of Holmes County leader Zelma Williams Croom.

### Information

Chester Creek Café, 7-9 p.m.

Feb. 17, 902 E. 8th St., Duluth.

Presentation at 8.

*Mike Creger and Robin Washington contributed to this story*

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