

WE BELIEVED WE  
WERE IMMORTAL

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*Twelve Reporters Who  
Covered the 1962 Integration  
Crisis at Ole Miss*

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KATHLEEN W. WICKHAM

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*Preface by Bob Schieffer*



*The astonishing story of a forgotten  
group of heroes who journeyed into  
America's heart of darkness...*

In these days when some critics have made journalists their favorite punching bags, Kathleen Wickham recalls a time when the press was at its heroic best covering the civil rights movement.

Here are flesh-and-blood reporters whose dispatches from the war-torn University of Mississippi campus remind us what real journalism looks like and why we need it now more than ever.

Jerry Mitchell, investigative reporter for *The Clarion-Ledger*

Kathleen Wickham's "We Believed We Were Immortal" is a fresh approach to the 1962 riot at Ole Miss, where Paul Guihard became the only journalist killed during the civil rights movement and many other reporters earned their battle stripes.

Curtis Wilkie, author of *Dixie: A Personal Odyssey*

This is the astonishing story of a forgotten group of heroes who journeyed into America's heart of darkness to witness what one observer called "a window into Hell," and risked their lives so we could learn the truth about ourselves.

An unforgettable, searing, inspiring book.

William Doyle, author of *An American Insurrection*

Because of the reporters Kathleen Wickham chose to write about, this is one of the most important books of the era.

James Meredith, author of *A Mission From God*

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KATHLEEN W. WICKHAM

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To Lucy Komisar:

Thank you for your commitment  
to journalism, and your support.

Best wishes.

Kathleen Wickham

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*Yoknapatawpha Press  
Oxford, Mississippi*



Photo courtesy of Lucy Komisar.

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## *Lucy Komisar*

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Lucy Komisar, a junior at Queens College, arrived in Jackson two weeks before James Meredith enrolled in The University of Mississippi. Her goal was to write for the *Mississippi Free Press*, a weekly newspaper financed by the Mississippi NAACP chapter and civil rights activists. Its mission was to inform the state's black citizens about voting rights issues. Traveling from New York to Mississippi on a Greyhound bus, Komisar soon noticed signs at bus terminals designating separate drinking fountains for whites and blacks. Her mission to report discrimination had begun.<sup>444</sup>

The only daughter of politically inactive New Yorkers, Bronx-born Komisar was on track to become a high school teacher of Spanish or French. She had graduated fourth in her high school class in Valley Stream, Long Island. For bright girls in 1959 the options were often limited to careers in education or nursing as there were few role models in other professional fields much less opportunities for employment. Her family-life was traditional—for the most part her mother stayed at home (Komisar also had two brothers) and her father worked as a salesman for a canning company. Her grandparents had emigrated from Russia but the family were non-practicing Jews and religion played little role, if any, in her commitment to social justice.

It was while a freshman at Queens College, part of the city's free college network, that Komisar's life opened up as she took advantage of the rich culture life and educational opportunities offered by the college. Attending a current events colloquium at Yale University in March 1960, Komisar heard a presentation by civil rights activist Allard Lowenstein, who spoke about the recent lunch counter sit-in at a Woolworth's lunch counter in Greensboro, N.C.<sup>445</sup> For Komisar this was a call to action: "The sit-ins had just started a month before.

It was a very dramatic occurrence and very moving. There were several hundred of us at the conference to talk about current events; it wasn't just about the sit-ins. But he was there, and got many of us involved. From then on, I was involved in the civil rights movement.<sup>446</sup>

Absorbing Lowenstein's passion, Komisar joined the Young People's Socialist League, the Queens College chapter of the NAACP and the National Student Association. She then began her career advocating for reform and attended the formative meeting of the Student Non-violent Coordinating Committee. SNCC became a major force in the Freedom Rides and early civil rights activities. A year later, as an YPSL volunteer staff member she participated in a sit-in in New York in support of movie theater desegregation efforts in Texas.

In early 1962 she was arrested in Elkton, Maryland, for entering a restaurant with a black friend seeking to be served. Her presence in Maryland stemmed from her participation in the U.S. 40 Freedom Rides, which sought to desegregate buses as well as restaurants, bowling alleys and drugstores.<sup>447</sup> "I thought then, I'm going to have to decide now for the rest of my life that I will do what I believe in and not be silenced by fear of not getting a job. I decided though it may well have had consequences."<sup>448</sup>

In the summer of 1962, Komisar said she yearned to do more than participate in sit-ins. A chance meeting with one of the founders of the *Free Press* at the annual Midwest meeting of the National Students Association led Komisar to head to Mississippi. William Higgs, the white Mississippi lawyer who helped found the *Free Press*, wanted to use the newspaper "to secure these (freedom of speech, worship, movement, and freedom from intimidation) freedoms for those Mississippians who have been denied them."<sup>449</sup> Komisar had little experience beyond working on her high school and college newspapers, and Brenda Starr on her mind.<sup>450</sup> "I decided to go to Mississippi. I took a leave of absence from school. That was in August, and a month later, I took a bus to Mississippi."<sup>451</sup>

Editor Charles Butts recalled that Komisar did not contact him before she arrived by bus: "she just got on the bus and came... (deciding) this is where she had to be." He said Komisar was "very-self

assured" and a "strong woman when that was not as common." "You don't see that as often as you do today, particularly among women of that age. She was not even old enough to vote. You had to be 21."<sup>452</sup> Komisar said she "soon became editor in name as well as a fact as Charlie focused on raising money for the operation and writing the editorials."<sup>453</sup>

The job had its dangers: The two journalists made sure they were never alone in the office and lived in separate furnished apartments in the white part of Jackson because "we were putting out a newspaper that did not make us very popular with segregationist whites," Komisar recalled. "We would just do our jobs. Our paper would be published and we would go around town and talk to people who we had to talk to. We were not going to give them any reason to light a fire, in that respect we had to be very circumspect."<sup>454</sup> The pair received no salary, only food and rent money of about \$20 a week.<sup>455</sup> Komisar added that she felt "welcome and safe in the black part of Jackson and somewhat alienated from the white part, and a bit nervous there."<sup>456</sup>

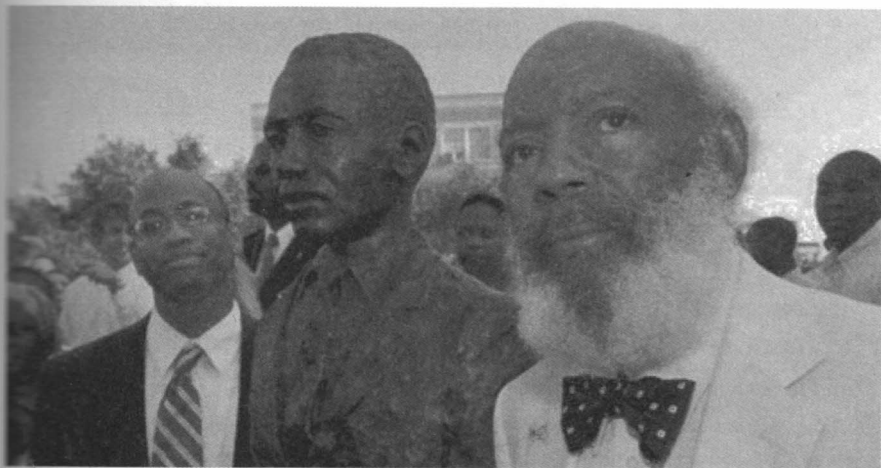
Although she never directly experienced danger or physical assault, Komisar was aware that her presence, and the newspaper, was not welcomed in the white community. "I would go to the people I needed to interview, and then would go home. I didn't go wandering around at night myself. I would just go home. What else would I do? I had to be in the black part of town to do the stories, and then I lived in the white part of town."<sup>457</sup>

When Meredith was admitted to the university Komisar was holed up in the *Mississippi Free Press* office." I was writing the whole paper and we didn't have the luxury to send reporters. I would have had to go by bus," she recalled. "It was a question of logistics."<sup>458</sup>

Instead, Komisar, whose official title was managing editor, relied on telephone interviews to write the story.<sup>459</sup> Yet despite her contention that no *Free Press* reporters were sent to Oxford, the October 6, 1962 issue included a first-person account of the riot and its aftermath.<sup>460</sup> The story carries no byline as was typical of stories published in the paper. Butts said because the staff consisted of only two people "we would incorporate conversations with people to get reports."<sup>461</sup>

Meanwhile, the forces behind the *Free Press* did not go unnoticed in Mississippi. The paper was the brainchild of Medgar Evers, the NAACP activist murdered in Jackson in 1963. Evers wanted a vehicle to communicate civil rights news to the state's black citizens.<sup>462</sup> Joining Higgs as founder on the HiCo (an acronym for Hinds County, the newspaper's home county) incorporation papers was the Rev. Robert L.T. Smith Jr., an African-American running for Congress, the future head of the Mississippi Democratic Freedom Party and the owner of Smith's Grocery. The newspaper's offices were in a back room at the grocery. All board members were African-American.<sup>463</sup>

Butts noted that Smith's candidacy gained legitimacy because it had the backing of a newspaper.<sup>464</sup> While the paper's circulation was small it attracted enough readers to be ranked third in the state in terms of circulation (with an estimated circulation of 40,000) behind *The Clarion-Ledger* and *Jackson Daily News*.<sup>465</sup> Butts noted: "that tells you how illiterate and unread they were" in Mississippi.<sup>466</sup> Subscribers hailed from the state's rural population and the newspaper was distributed through the mail. "Back then weekly newspapers could be circulated for a fraction of a cent, as long as you were a



James Meredith, right, and son John attend the Meredith statue commemoration at the University of Mississippi.

Photo by Robert Jordan, University of Mississippi Communications Department.



newspaper, as long as a subscribed newspaper."<sup>467</sup> The paper cost one dollar for 52 issues.

Komisar spent a year in Mississippi, returning to New York in August 1963 after participating in the 1963 Freedom March in Washington, D.C. After graduation Komisar landed a job as a newsroom assistant at the *New York Post* and when she could not get promoted to a newspaper job launched her career as a feminist, serving one term as vice president of the National Organization of Women. She also went on to a successful career as a political organizer, investigative journalist, book author and freelance writer, focusing on social and political issues.

According to Butts, Komisar was "young enough not to know what the adults knew. The adults knew you could not persuade a giant and you couldn't do those kinds of things, and she went and did them."<sup>468</sup>