CIVIL RIGHTS-ERA MURDER CASES: 'ANOTHER DAY FOR JUSTICE'

Self-taught legal expert Alvin Sykes is on a quest to get long-unpursued suspects into court before it's too late.

By Drew Jubera
The Atlanta Journal-Constitution
Published on: 06/03/07

Jackson, Miss. —- A fourth-floor courtroom filled here last week much the way Southern courtrooms now fill every few years for a civil rights-era murder case.

The 71-year-old defendant, James Seale, requested headphones as he sat with his lawyers during jury selection so he could hear the proceedings.

The former crop duster and reputed Klansman is charged with kidnapping and conspiracy in connection with the May 2, 1964, abduction and killings of two black teenagers. The bodies of Henry Dee and Charles Moore were found in the Mississippi River, tied to a Jeep engine block.

Seale has pleaded not guilty to the federal charges.

Also inside the downtown courthouse: aging relatives of the murdered boys, including Thomas Moore, 63, a Vietnam veteran who worked almost a decade to get his brother's moldering case reopened.

Before entering this historic scene and sitting in a rear pew, Alvin Sykes tugged at his blue-jean jacket, stroked his scraggly goatee and exhaled.

"Another day for justice," said Sykes, an improbable presence at yet another improbable decades-old case.

Sykes, a high school dropout and practicing Buddhist who once lived in a homeless shelter and learned the law reading books in public libraries, has become both a catalyst and an inspiration during the 11th-hour rush to reopen these old murder cases before the killers die off.

Since 1989, authorities in Mississippi and six other states have re-examined 29 civil rights-era murders, with 28 resulting arrests and 22 convictions.

The FBI has uncovered 51 more killings, and the Southern Poverty Law Center has a list of 127 race-related killings between 1954 and 1968.

It's in this atmosphere that Sykes has brokered meetings with people as various as U.S. senators, district attorneys and victims' relatives to seek long-delayed justice.

His behind-the-scenes maneuvering was key to the FBI's reinvestigation of the infamous 1955 murder of Emmett Till, a black Chicago teen brutally killed after he allegedly whistled at a white woman in Money, Miss. (Earlier this year, a Mississippi grand jury did not return an indictment in the case.)

Sykes also generated the idea for legislation now before Congress that grew out of the reopening of that now-52-year-old slaying. Commonly known as the Till Bill, and sponsored in the House of Representatives by Rep. John Lewis (D-Ga.), it would fund a separate unit in the Justice Department devoted to investigating civil rights-era crimes.

"He's a warrior," said Moore of the mild-mannered Sykes, whom he credits with inspiring him while he sought justice for his brother. "Every now and then a person comes along who you say, 'Where'd this guy come from?' Alvin's one of those guys. He might not have this degree or that background, but he has a lot of dedication and inner strength."

Added Margaret Burnham, a Northeastern University law professor who recently invited Sykes to speak at a conference in Boston about civil rights-era cases, co-sponsored by Harvard University, "He's a completely self-taught man who's incredibly skilled at knowing what buttons to push, when to push them and what cases the government might respond to. He's better at it than hundreds of people I've met in my long life as a civil rights lawyer.

"He brings a passion and insight to the work that would be extraordinary for anybody —- a university-trained academic or lawyer —- but it's particularly extraordinary given his personal history."

>>>

Sykes was born to a 14-year-old at a home for unwed mothers, then taken in by a single 48-year-old friend of the family in Kansas City, Mo. He was sickly, in and out of hospitals with epilepsy, and says around age 11 he was sexually abused by a couple that lived across the street.

His formal education was spotty —- he spent three years at Boys Town, the facility for at-risk kids in Omaha —- then left school for good at 16.

He lived briefly with his biological mother —- he thought for years she was a cousin —- but says she was an alcoholic and rarely employed. He ran into her years later when he was homeless. She lived at the same shelter.

But Sykes calls leaving school the start of his education. Working nights managing a band, he spent his days holed up in a library. "Education was important to me —- that's the reason I left school," he said. "The administration was more concerned with students getting a piece of paper than an education. So I started teaching myself."

He also sat in on trials, watching legal strategies, researching what he didn't understand. He became involved in a federal desegregation case with the Kansas City public schools and befriended a Justice Department official. "I learned about cases and the system and started applying it to real matters," he said.

Sykes' work as a victims' advocate became locally renowned after a string of Kansas City musicians were murdered in the late '70s and early '80s. When a white defendant was acquitted of beating a prominent black musician to death, Sykes went back to the library with the victim's wife. "It was like in the movies," he recalled. "We just kept opening books. Then 10 minutes before closing time, I found it."

Sykes unearthed an obscure federal statute that allowed the defendant to be prosecuted on a civil rights violation. He sent everything he found to Justice Department lawyer Richard Roberts, now a federal judge in Washington, who got an indictment. The defendant was convicted and received a life sentence.

"His seriousness of purpose was impressive," Roberts said. "It made answering his phone calls much more attractive."

Sykes had worked for or founded a variety of local victims' rights groups, rarely living on more than $10,000 a year, when in 2003 he read a story about Till's mother wanting her son's case reopened. Two documentarians also suggested there were living suspects beyond the two men, now dead, who were acquitted of the 14-year-old's murder but later bragged about it in an article.

Sykes and Donald Burger, a retired Justice Department official who befriended Sykes during the school desegregation case, met with Mamie Till-Mobley in Chicago and talked about pursuing the case. Till-Mobley died days later, after co-founding, with Sykes and others, the Emmett Till Justice Campaign.

"Alvin was the aggressor," said Wheeler Parker, 68, who traveled with Till, his cousin, from Chicago to Mississippi in 1955. "Don had more contacts and knowledge, but Alvin had the aggressiveness and nerve to pursue it. The fire's in his belly."

Sykes arranged a meeting in Oxford, Miss., with a U.S. attorney, the district attorney who would prosecute the case, a Till relative and documentarian Keith Beauchamp. The FBI soon agreed to investigate the case for local authorities.

"He was a very adept facilitator," recalled Jim Greenlee, the U.S. attorney. "Without his efforts, the chances for the investigation being reopened would have been much less. I call him a catalyst."

During the Till investigation, Sykes became aware of dozens of other cold cases from that era. He couldn't create a justice campaign for each one, so he envisioned a unit within the Justice Department with the money, resources and expertise to investigate them all. He sold the idea to Missouri's conservative Republican Sen. Jim Talent, who introduced the so-called Till Bill in 2005.

Talent, who credits Sykes with the initial idea, lost re-election last year, and the original bill stalled. But the Emmett Till Unsolved Civil Rights Crime Act has been reintroduced by Reps. Lewis and Kenny Hulshof (R-Mo.) in the House and Sens. Chris Dodd (D-Conn.) and Patrick Leahy (D-Vt.). It provides $11.5 million annually to look into the era's unsolved murders, and political observers say its chances now look good. Many give Sykes credit.

"He has played the role of public advocate on Capitol Hill to remind legislators who may not have experienced the tragedy of segregation and racial discrimination that unsolved crimes against African-Americans have left an intolerable stain on our democracy," said Brenda Jones, spokeswoman for Lewis. "He has helped remind many members of Congress that we must take steps to right these wrongs."

>>>

Leaving the Jackson courthouse during a break in the Seale trail, which continues with jury selection this week, Sykes shook his head.

"I was sitting there thinking, 'When I was 16, it was just like this.' I was sitting in a courtroom, getting an education."

Sykes sometimes wishes he could return to the music business, make a better living, have a better life. Living off donations, some speaking fees and a book Till's mother wrote that he sometimes sells out of a bag, he doesn't even own a car. Friends drove him to Jackson.

But he says he can't leave the cause yet. There are still too many low-profile cases he worries will stay lost. Even the Till case languished five decades without a reinvestigation.

"The thing that gets me [maddest] in terms of the Till case," he said, "is the realization that [the two killers who were acquitted on murder charges] could have been tried for kidnapping before they died.

"I have a chip on my shoulder about all the people more knowledgeable than me who could have pursued that case. On my more benevolent days, I say they just didn't know the law enough. On my most cynical days, I say it was just too much work."

SYKES' SUCCESSES

> Sykes' behind-the-scenes maneuvering was key to the FBI's reinvestigation of the 1955 murder of Emmett Till (left).

> Sykes generated the idea for legislation that would create a separate unit in the Justice Department devoted to civil rights-era crimes.

DECADES-OLD CRIMES

Since 1989, officials in Mississippi and other states have taken another look:

29: Number of murders re-examined

28: Number of arrests made

22: Number of guilty verdicts