

## FBI opens 3 civil rights cold cases

By Robert K. Gordon -- The Birmingham News

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Former Alabama state trooper James Bonard Fowler involved in one case awaits trial in 1965 Jimmie Lee Jackson slaying case.

The FBI said Monday it has reopened investigations into three more Alabama slayings from the 1960s, including one case involving a former state trooper charged in 2007 with another civil-rights era murder.

The reopened cases are:

**The May 1966 killing of a black motorist** at the Alabaster police station by James Bonard Fowler, the former trooper charged in 2007 with two counts of murder in the 1965 shooting of Jimmie Lee Jackson in Marion.

**The September 1963 shooting** by Birmingham police officer Jack Parker of a black teenager on the day of the Sixteenth Street Baptist Church bombing.

**The April 1963 gunning down** of a white Baltimore letter carrier in Attalla on a march to promote integration.

"It doesn't matter if it was four days ago or 40 years ago, protecting the civil rights of all Americans is a high priority for the FBI," said Paul Daymond, spokesman at the FBI's Birmingham office.

Since 2007, the FBI has been methodically working through 108 cases from the civil rights era for possible prosecution. So far, the initiative has netted two successful federal prosecutions and the referral of three cases for state prosecution, including the ongoing case against Fowler.

The FBI is searching for the next of kin of victims in the newly reopened Alabama cases to keep them abreast of the investigations and possibly obtain new leads.

Nathan Johnson, 34, was shot and killed by Fowler on May 8, 1966, according to news accounts from the time and police reports.

Authorities said Johnson was arrested on U.S. 31 in Alabaster on suspicion of drunken driving and taken to the Shelby County community's city hall.

While there, according to articles in The Birmingham News, police said Johnson grabbed a billy club and hit Fowler twice. Fowler, unable to get the club from Johnson, shot him twice in the chest, the story quoted authorities as saying.

Fowler, now 76, is awaiting trial on charges of first-degree murder and second-degree murder in the Marion case.

In that case, Jimmie Lee Jackson was shot during a civil rights protest on Feb. 18, 1965, and died eight days later at a Selma hospital. The defense contends that Jackson hit Fowler with a bottle and that Jackson was going for Fowler's gun at the time of the shooting. The incident helped spur the Selma-to-Montgomery voting rights march.

The second case the FBI highlighted Monday was the death of Johnny Robinson, 16, who was killed by a shotgun blast from Jack Parker, a Birmingham police officer, on Sept. 15, 1963, the day of the Sixteenth Street Baptist Church bombing.

Newspaper reports said the boy was shot after he had been throwing rocks at police cars. Police were responding to a call of racial disturbance and said their cars were pelted with rocks upon arrival.

The officer who shot Robinson said he fired a warning shot into the ground as Robinson fled, according to news accounts of the incident. The coroner said an investigation showed Robinson died from pellets from a police officer's shotgun.

The third case involves William Lewis Moore, a 35-year-old letter carrier from Baltimore who took two weeks' vacation to march across the Deep South for racial equality.

Moore, a white man, set out to walk from Chattanooga to Jackson, Miss., to hand deliver a letter to Mississippi Gov. Ross Barnett, urging him to integrate the University of Mississippi. He wore a sandwich board proclaiming integration.

About 90 miles into his trip, he was shot twice and killed in Attalla.

The shooting "gained nationwide attention and brought numerous newsmen to Gadsden," an April 28, 1963, Birmingham News article said. Two men were arrested, including a DeKalb County grocer and known Ku Klux Klan member, but no one was ever convicted.

Daymond, the FBI spokesman in Birmingham, said all three cases would be thoroughly pursued.

"These cases are actively being investigated," he said.

### **Powerful message**

The fact that these cases are being looked at again sends a powerful message, said Adam Lankford, a criminal justice professor at the University of Alabama.

Some say "it's in the past, leave it alone," Lankford said. "Others say, if justice is blind, then you need to continue the fight.

"Frankly, the concerted effort to go back and revisit these cases sends the powerful message that civil rights will be protected."

The passage of time may even help solve some of these cases, Lankford said.

"You think about the progress that has been made in the past 50 years, there may be some witnesses willing to open up and come clean," Lankford said. "These cases really are more solvable than they were in the past."

Bishop Calvin Woods' brother, the late Rev. Abraham Woods, officiated at the Robinson funeral in 1963.

"I think it's marvelous that the FBI is looking at these cases," Calvin Woods said. "Delay does not mean denied. Sometimes the wheels of justice move slower than we want them to, but they are sure."

Anyone with information is asked to call the FBI at 326-6166.