

No confession and no remorse from 'Mississippi Burning' killer 50 years later

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Edgar Ray Killen listens in 2005 as the Neshoba County district attorney, Mark Duncan, right, reads the indictment charging him with the murder of three civil rights workers. Photograph: Rogelio Solis/AP

Craggy-faced and ornery, Edgar Ray Killen bears the signs of his 89 years. His hands are still scarred and rough from decades in the east [Mississippi](#) sawmills. He has a muscular build even as he maneuvers in his wheelchair. Time has not softened his views and he remains an ardent segregationist.

And he steadfastly refuses to discuss the “Freedom Summer” slayings of three civil rights workers, which sparked national outrage, helped spur passage of the 1964 Civil Rights Act and landed him behind bars.

Killen was interviewed by the Associated Press inside the Mississippi state penitentiary, where he is serving a 60-year sentence; it was his first interview since his conviction on state charges of manslaughter in 2005, 41 years to the

day after James Chaney, Andrew Goodman and Michael Schwerner were killed and buried in a red clay dam. An earlier trial in 1967, on federal charges, resulted in a mistrial.

Killen wouldn't say much about the 1964 killings. He said he remains a segregationist who does not believe in race equality but contends he bears no ill will toward blacks.

The three civil rights workers – black Mississippian Chaney and white New Yorkers Schwerner and Goodman – were investigating the burning of a black church outside Philadelphia, Mississippi, when they were stopped on an accusation of speeding and held for hours in the Neshoba County jail.

Witnesses testified that Killen rounded up carloads of Klansmen to intercept the three men upon their release and helped arrange for a bulldozer to hide the bodies.

The bodies were found 44 days later, buried miles away in a red-clay dam.

In his four-hour interview with the AP, Killen is talkative but his mind wanders, a problem he attributes to brain damage from a logging accident a few months before his trial. He says he has never and will never talk about the events that became immortalized in the film *Mississippi Burning*.

Killen first contacted an AP reporter 18 months ago.

In his first letter on 3 March 2013, he made clear that no conversation with a reporter would result in a confession.

“That is not where I am coming from after 50 years of silence,” Killen wrote. “I have never discussed the 1964 case with anyone – an attorney, the FBI, local law nor friend – and those who say so are lying.”

Since then, both he and the AP filed repeated requests to have a reporter added to his visitation list. The Mississippi department of corrections, citing a policy of not allowing media to see inmates, denied at least a dozen requests.

The agency abruptly agreed this month.

Visitors are not allowed to bring pens, pencils or paper into the prison.

Killen often leans in because he has trouble hearing and cups a hand to his left ear in the direction of guests sitting farther away.

He speaks of associations with hundreds of people during his life – from political figures to friends and neighbors. Killen is talkative about corruption in the Mississippi prison system, his good times and close relationship with the late Sen James O Eastland and his preaching at a tiny Baptist church in east Mississippi from which he got the nickname “Preacher”.

But his wife said no friends visit or write her husband.

“They don’t come; they don’t ask about him,” Betty Jo said as she left the visitors’ center at the prison.

Killen said people at Parchman were well aware of his identity before he arrived.

“Oh yes. They knew who I was,” he said.

Killen said he had some run-ins with black prisoners and had received threats but nothing ever came from them.

He won’t talk about his well-known association with the Ku Klux Klan as an organizer. He does say he knew some people in the KKK.

A question about what he thought of the testimony of friends at his trial drew his anger.

“Friends? What friends? You talking about Winstead?”

Mike Winstead testified that he was 10 years old and sitting on his grandfather’s porch one Sunday in 1967 listening to Killen and his

grandfather talk.

“My grandfather asked him, did he have anything to do with those boys being killed,” said Winstead, who was serving a 30-year sentence for rape. “He told my grandfather yes, and he was proud of it”.

Killen said he didn't know Winstead, and never visited the house.

“I think I would remember if I did that,” Killen said.

Chaney's sister, the Rev Julia Chaney Moss of Willingboro, New Jersey, said she was not surprised Killen wouldn't talk about the slayings.

“I can only wish Mr. Killen peace at this juncture in his life ... If he can achieve a modicum of peace, I wish that for him,” Chaney said.

Killen's first trial on federal conspiracy charges was held in 1967, but the all-white jury could not reach a verdict. One juror said she could not convict a preacher. Of the seven who were convicted, none served more than six years.

Because many of those who testified in 1967 were no longer available, prosecutors got permission to have others read transcripts of the earlier testimony into the new court record.

A convergence of factors led to a new trial in 2005. There was a new district attorney and Mississippi attorney general, persistent media coverage and advocacy groups urging a closer look.

In the 2005 trial, the Mississippi attorney general, Jim Hood, acknowledged that Killen did not shoot the men himself, but said Killen's role as organizer made him just as guilty as those who fired the guns.

Testimony read in court showed Killen ordered fellow Klansmen to attack Schwerner, Chaney and Goodman and then went to a funeral home to create an alibi for himself.

James Jordan, a Klansman who has since died, testified for the prosecution in 1967 that Killen showed the killers where the men were jailed and where to wait to hunt them down once they were released. As carloads of Klansmen drove off to intercept the three doomed men, Jordan said, they let Killen off at a funeral home.

“He said he had to go there because if anything happened, he would be the first one questioned,” Jordan said.

Killen’s only response today to any of that was his often repeated contention that he is not a criminal convict but a political prisoner.

One thing of which he is certain: “I could have beat that thing if I’d had the mental ability”, Killen said, tapping his bald head.

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