Scores of civil-rights activists were murdered in the American south in the 1950s and 60s. Their killers mostly went unpunished. But now cases are being reopened, as a new generation resolves to see justice done at last. Suzanne Goldenberg reports

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Michael Schwerner, James Chaney and Andrew Goodman, the three civil-rights campaigners beaten and shot dead by Ku Klux Klan members in Philadelphia, Mississippi, in June 1964. Photograph: AP

This is a Mississippi story. On January 11 1966, a gold-toned Plymouth Fury carrying a group of voting-rights activists crashed on a stretch of road near the small town of Sidon in the west of the state. Two African-American women, Birdia Keglar and Adlena Hamlett, were killed on that day. That much is certain. But in their deaths is buried a painful question that has gnawed at three generations of their families. Was this an ordinary car wreck, or were the two women, who had previously been threatened, shot at and burned in effigy because of their efforts to register black voters, targeted on that road? Engineered car crashes were a known tactic by the Ku Klux Klan in Mississippi in the 1950s and 60s. Violent crimes against African-Americans were rarely investigated or punished. And even if the women were murdered by white supremacists, was it better, as some members of Keglar’s own family believed, to leave such suspicions left unspoken?

Now, 41 years after that crash, Keglar’s cousin, Gwen Dailey, is campaigning for the FBI to open an investigation into her death. Despite the passage of time, the lack of recorded
evidence, and the death of what few witnesses there may have been to that accident long ago, it is not an entirely unreasonable hope.

On February 27, the FBI announced at a press conference in Washington that it was going to take a new look at more than 100 unsolved murder cases from 1954 to 1968, the height of the struggle over racial integration and voting rights, when thousands of black and white activists in the south took on a culture fiercely opposed to any notion of equality or change. The agency’s director, Robert Mueller, said he had directed 17 field offices across the south to look into the files and determine which cases could still lead to a feasible prosecution despite the intervening years - in Mississippi, one new trial gets under way next month.

The move is an acknowledgment of a new generation in Mississippi that wants to put the past behind it, not by forgetting, but by trying to render some form of justice. Since 1989, the authorities in seven states have reopened investigations into 29 killings from the civil-rights era, leading to 28 arrests and 22 convictions. The true number of such murders could easily run into the hundreds. Shortly before the FBI announcement, the Southern Poverty Law Centre, which reports on hate crimes from its base in Montgomery, Alabama, put forward its own list of more than 70 suspicious killings that were never investigated by the authorities. During those violent years, there was very little interest from state police or the FBI in investigating or even recording the suspicious deaths of African Americans, let alone those who were activists.

But the past has caught up with Mississippi. In most cases, relatives of those victims have set the pace for change by putting pressure on the authorities for an investigation. In others, investigative journalists or prosecutors have taken it upon themselves to reopen so-called cold cases. In Gwen Dailey’s case, it was a question of putting to rest the doubt surrounding the true manner of her cousin’s death, doubt that had been buzzing for almost all of her life. "I never stopped thinking about it. It wasn’t a constant everyday thing, but I never stopped wondering: why did it happen, why does this kind of thing happen?"

Dailey is 57 now. As a child growing up in a close-knit family on a farm in the very rural Tallahatchie County in Mississippi, she was eager to spend her days tagging along after Birdia Keglar. Unusually for those days, Keglar was an active businesswoman. She ran a funeral parlour in town, belonged to several service organisations, and raised two sons practically on her own after husband’s early death.

By the time Dailey knew her, Keglar was well into middle age and had earned a reputation as a persistent activist for voting rights in Tallahatchie County. The poor northwestern corner of the state, flat and low-lying, was one of the most recalcitrant when it came to recognising the rights of African-Americans who, then as now, formed a majority in the county. It was here that Emmett Till, a 14-year-old African-American boy from Chicago, was kidnapped by a group of white men after he was accused of whistling at a white woman in a grocery store in 1955. When his body was dragged out of the Tallahatchie river three days later, there was a bullet in his skull and a heavy processing fan from a cotton gin attached to his body with barbed wire as a weight. A jury of 12 white men deliberated for 67 minutes before acquitting the two suspects in the crime; a few months later the pair confessed to murdering Till in a magazine interview.
In those days, Keglar was one of the few African-Americans in Tallahatchie, male or female, who dared to be active in the civil-rights movement. She travelled to the Mississippi state capital of Jackson and to Washington, DC, marched in Alabama, and spent more than 10 years battling the local authorities at home to be allowed to register to vote. Her family says she was the first black woman to cast her ballot in the county. 

"She was a tiny little lady. She must have been four foot nine. She wasn’t afraid," says Margaret Block, a civil-rights activist who was 18 when she met Keglar in the early 60s. "She was about the only one over there organising and leading organisations. Mrs Keglar was real serious. Everybody came to her for advice."

That activity created dangerous enemies for Keglar. Dailey says Keglar was often forced to change her route home from work after receiving threats. The lights were shot out at her home, and she was once forced off the road by a speeding blue truck. On the evening of January 11 1966, Keglar was returning from a meeting of civil-rights activists in Jackson when a local taxi driver turned up at the Dailey family home to pass on word of a car crash. The story in circulation was that Keglar had been killed on the spot in a head-on collision with another vehicle with a single white occupant. What the family could not entirely grasp on that day was that Mississippi was in the throes of a new statewide campaign of cross-burnings and violence organised by the Klan to protest at the start of investigations by Congress into civil rights abuses.

But, says Dailey, even then some things did not entirely add up. The two women in the car were horribly mutilated, the family says. Keglar was decapitated, which the family saw as a signature of a Klan killing. The car, a new model that belonged to and was driven by a relative of Keglar's named Grafton Gray, was never returned to the family from the crash site by the authorities. Neither were Keglar’s briefcase or her prized fur coat. There was no coroner’s report.

Dailey and other family members believe the car was deliberately rammed, and that the women were hauled out and tortured by the ambushing gang in front of the men who had been with them in the car. Despite surviving the crash and living for some years afterwards, Gray never spoke of what happened on that day. Neither did the other African-American survivor, who has also since died, nor a white activist from Massachusetts whom the family cannot locate. Over the years, Keglar’s surviving son, Robert, now 82, pressed his cousin Gray, who lived on the neighbouring farm, for details. But he says his relative was terrified. "He wouldn’t talk. I pressed him, but he just wouldn’t talk,” he says. "For months and years afterwards he would just go out to the edge of the field and cry," Dailey says.

Some details did seep out, Dailey says. A few days after the crash, the local white sheriff turned up at the family home to warn her father against asking too many questions. Robert Keglar received a similar visit. A few months later, his brother’s house was set on fire. His brother died. Then Robert Keglar was dismissed from his teacher’s job, as was Grafton Gray. The family decided it was best to set aside their doubts - or at least not voice them publicly.

Dailey moved to Chicago to work in healthcare; other family members, shocked and frightened, retreated into silence. Over the years, on visits home, Dailey asked her family about trying to investigate Keglar’s death. "My dad said the climate here was still the
same and if I was not going to live here and pursue this, I shouldn’t do it,” she says. In 2000, Dailey did give up her job in Chicago. When she moved home, she was nearly as old as Keglar was when she died - and suddenly she understood her father’s fear and reluctance.

Dailey began writing to local representatives regardless, and visited the authorities asking for records on her aunt’s death. On June 1 last year, her home town held a Birdia Keglar day. There are also plans to rename a strip of highway. "I have just been kind of pushing for something. I knew there could never be justice, but to get the incident recategorised so that it wasn’t just saying that it was an accident where two women were killed - then I think I can sleep at night," Dailey says.

It is an impulse that Jerry Mitchell understands. On the computer in his cubicle in the newsroom of the Clarion-Ledger newspaper in Jackson, Mitchell keeps his own reminder of the importance of dealing with the past. It’s a screensaver with the image of three young civil-rights workers: James Chaney, Andrew Goodman and Michael Schwerner. The three, who were in the south registering blacks to vote, were in Philadelphia, Mississippi, in June 1964, investigating the torching of a black church, when they were arrested for speeding. After their release, late at night, they were ambushed on a remote road by two carloads of Klan members. They were beaten before being shot dead, their bodies buried in an earthen dam, and their car set on fire. "It’s kind of them saying to me: ‘Don’t forget about us.’ So I kept writing about it,” Mitchell says. "I don’t know if there is enough there to prosecute, but there is enough there to keep looking at it."

And enough to keep writing. A white southerner who is now 47, Mitchell had stumbled into what has turned out to be his life’s work when he got a ticket to see the 1989 film Mississippi Burning, about the three civil-rights workers. Eight months later, he had a front-page story in the Clarion-Ledger about how a secretive state agency called the Sovereignty Commission had spied on Schwerner before his death, and circulated the registration number of his car around the state.

Over the years, Mitchell’s investigations would help persuade the authorities that it was possible to bring ageing white supremacists to justice. His stories led to successful prosecutions in some of the most notorious cases of the civil-rights era, starting with the murder of the state secretary of the National Association for the Advancement of Coloured People, Medgar Evers, who was shot dead on the doorstep of his home in 1963. In the files of the Sovereignty Commission, Mitchell unearthed documents showing how the agency surreptitiously helped in the defence of the Klansman Byron de la Beckwith, who was on trial for Evers’ murder. The revelation led to a new trial for Beckwith and his conviction on murder charges in 1994.

A subsequent Mitchell story exposed the holes in the alibi of Klansman Bobby Frank Cherry, leading to his conviction in the 1963 firebombing of a church in Birmingham, Alabama. Then Mitchell started combing the state’s history archives, discovering a conversation with a Klan wizard that implicated a preacher named Edgar Ray Killen in organising the mob that killed the three civil-rights workers. Mitchell had a new target and, in 2005, he got him. Killen was convicted of the manslaughter of the three, and sentenced to 60 years in prison. Initially, the preacher, then 80, was freed on bail pending an appeal after pleading that he was confined to his wheelchair and needed oxygen to
survive. However, a month after the verdict, Mitchell wrote a story on how Killen had been seen filling up his car unaided at a local petrol station. The preacher was ordered to remain in jail. But even after that victory, Mitchell says he is not done. "I continue to look at the three civil-rights workers' case," he says. "A number of these guys are walking around still."

Persuading readers and editors that there was an interest in pursuing these long-buried cases was a challenge at first. "I got a lot of calls saying, 'What are you doing writing about this dead N-word?'" he said. "I even had people I knew tell me: 'Jerry, why are you writing about this old stuff? Leave it alone.'"

Mitchell is rarely told to leave things alone now that he has won his paper a string of awards, but he says the work does not get easier. Though he continues to come across large numbers of suspected hate crimes from the past, he says he is forced to focus only on the most viable - those with an FBI paper trail, or where surviving witnesses offer a hope of eventual prosecution. But time is running out. "It just takes so much energy to do one of these cases. It's hard to crank it back up again," he says. "The window is closing. If there are going to be cases brought, then they have got to be brought fairly quickly."

In Tallahatchie County, where Birdia Keglar and Emmett Till died, the past 20 years have brought the emergence of an elected African-American political class, shifting the balance of power within the communities. Fifty years after the sham trial for Till's killers, it would be unheard of for an all-white male jury to sit on a murder trial. The most senior elected official in the county - Jerome Little, chairman of the board of supervisors - is African-American. Little is one of many people in Mississippi who has visions of turning the sites associated with Till's death into a tourist trail. He says his ambition is for the county to offer a formal apology to Till's relatives for his murder. In Philadelphia, where the three civil-rights workers were killed, black and white citizens have spent years working towards reconciliation. Now they are concerned with making sure that school textbooks have chapters on the civil-rights movement, and they have political support. These days, Mississippi has more elected black officials than any other state in America.

These changes have helped lay the foundation on which it is now possible to prosecute the crimes of the past, says Douglas Jones. He was instrumental in the prosecution of one of the most horrific crimes of the civil-rights era: the 1963 bombing of the Birmingham church, which killed four girls attending Sunday school in the basement. Although the authorities had identified four prime suspects within days of the bombing, only one man had ever been successfully prosecuted - until Jones took up the case. In April 2001, he secured the conviction of Klan member Thomas Blanton for driving the men to the church in the middle of the night to lay a dozen sticks of dynamite on the window ledge. A year later he helped to secure a life sentence against another accomplice, Bobby Frank Cherry, who is believed to have set the fuse. "Today these old civil-rights cases will get a much more adept and critical review in terms of trying to open cases than they would have 15 or 20 years ago," Jones says. "I think most prosecutors would say: 'I would give it a look.'"

But as Jones learned with the Birmingham bombing case, obtaining new evidence was almost impossible. Memories fade, witnesses die. In many instances there is no documentation. And despite Jones's optimistic outlook about race relations in the south, he found very little evidence of latter-day conscience in former associates of the Klan. His
investigators interviewed 30 to 40 former Klan members, but found none genuinely willing to talk. Instead, Jones focused on mining the contacts Cherry and Blanton made in the years after the bombing. He discovered that Cherry had admitted to a granddaughter that he had had a hand in the girls' death. Then, through a process he describes as "the hand of God or something", one of Cherry's five former wives came forward to say he had told her he had lit the fuse on the explosives.

Jones admits, however, that his greatest asset was simply the chance to put evidence before a jury that was not blinkered by racism. PowerPoint presentations helped, as did television screens to view images of the girls' broken bodies, but the main thing was timing. "People were ready. Not only has there just been a general shift in attitudes in people who sit on juries, but there has been a seismic shift in communities, communities who have tried for so long to hide their past," he says.

So how does it feel to bring some measure of healing to one of America's great injustices? Jones is still troubled by the bombing. "As good as it feels to convict a guy and put him in prison, the tragic part of this case is that I never can really tell the story. I can't tell who built the bomb, and who took the bomb and planted it in Thomas Blanton's car. Did it go off at the right time that morning? Or was there a bad fuse, and it didn't go off when it was supposed to? All these questions are unanswered."

Gwen Dailey's questions about the way Birdia Keglar died are just beginning.