

Writer recalls relationship

By RICHARD BROOKS

FROGMORE (AP) — J.B. Stoner and George McMillan are poles apart in their beliefs, hanging by their nails onto opposite ends of the political spectrum.

Yet they may team up for what could be a most revealing history of racial violence in the 1960s.

Stoner is the former chairman and one-time presidential candidate of the National States Rights Party, an organization dedicated to white supremacy at any cost.

He offered to kill McMillan for connecting him with the 1958 bombing of a black Baptist church in Birmingham, Ala.

And free-lance writer McMillan, possibly out of spite, promised in turn to write Stoner's biography.

From his office in the tabby-walled basement of Coffin Point Plantation, McMillan recounts his tempestuous relationship with Stoner, who recently began serving a 10-year sentence in Mount Meigs, Ala.

In 1980, more than 20 years after the fact, Stoner was convicted of bombing the 16th Street Baptist Church in Birmingham and has been locked in a protective custody cell at Kilby Correctional Facility near Montgomery

Savannah Municipal Airport.

The conversation with Stoner on both occasions was about what you'd expect from such a confirmed racist, the writer says. "It was incredible. He would say things you just would not believe or conceive of."

Living in Savannah Beach with Stoner was Jerry Ray, James Earl Ray's younger brother. He was Stoner's bodyguard and one of the prime sources of McMillan's book, "Portrait of an Assassin."

"I used to go over to Savannah Beach about every two weeks to see Jerry and sometimes Stoner would be there. I'd also call Jerry often and sometimes Stoner would answer the phone," McMillan says.

"I'd call him J.B. and he'd get mad as hell at that. He'd say, very angrily, 'You call me Mr. Stoner.'"

McMillan finished "Portrait of an Assassin" and lost contact with Jerry Ray and Stoner when the two moved from Savannah Beach to Atlanta in about 1976.

And more than 20 years after the Saturday Evening Post article, Stoner was indicted, tried and convicted of the 1958 church bombing. "As it turned out, everything in my article was correct," McMillan says.

"I called him up and said, 'Listen J.B., when you get to jail I'm going to

come and write the story of your life. You won't have a damn thing to do in jail but talk to me.'"

But after Stoner was convicted of the bombing, he disappeared.

Stoner remained a fugitive for more than two years before turning himself in to authorities. Where he hid was a mystery, but news reports quoted Stoner as saying he had been at a beach in Georgia.

McMillan suddenly interrupts his almost constant chatter about Stoner.

"I'm going to call Jerry," he says and dials the phone.

A woman in Marietta, Ga., answers, "Thunderbolt," which is a white-supremacist tabloid newspaper published by Stoner. Ray had gone to the post office, the woman says. McMillan leaves a message.

Jerry Ray later returns McMillan's call and says he and Stoner had already talked about calling the writer.

"Jerry said J.B. would be happy to talk to me after he's moved to his new cell in Mount Meigs, which is air conditioned," McMillan says.

Jerry Ray said he intends to continue working for the National States Rights Party until Stoner is released. "Even though he's sentenced to 10 years, he'll only have to serve five," he said. "If worse comes to worst, he'll be out in 1988."



Writing Time

George McMillan is a freelance writer living in Frogmore who has offered to write the biography of J.B. Stoner, former chairman and one-time presidential candidate of the National States Rights Party.

P Laserphoto

He threatened to
kill him.

The racial situation was reversed when McMillan and Stoner met in the early 1960s. And the 16th Street Baptist Church wasn't Stoner's only violently racist act, McMillan says.

"He incited more violence than any other single man in the South at that time," the writer says.

The Saturday Evening Post hired McMillan to cover the church-bombing story because "it was one of the monumental events of the civil rights struggle. The question in everybody's mind was, 'Who did it? That's what I was supposed to find out.'"

McMillan interviewed a number of people who knew parts of the story — a young Birmingham reporter, a Federal Bureau of Investigation informer who dated Alabama Ku Klux Klan members, a Birmingham rabbi, the U.S. District Attorney in Birmingham and city police officers.

"It was like weaving a tapestry. I'd get a little bit from one guy and then I'd go to another person to confirm it," he says.

Eventually, McMillan's article named several men who had been involved in the bombing — but not Stoner.

"However, I did describe the leader as a man with a limp — and everybody knew that was Stoner," who had polio as a child, McMillan says.

Months after the article was published, a Birmingham police officer contacted McMillan about a meeting between Stoner and Klan attorney Matt Murphy.

"This Birmingham cop called and told me that Stoner took an oath in Murphy's office that he was going to kill me," McMillan says.

Through the early and middle 1960s, the writer and the white supremacist were in the same place at the same time on several occasions — McMillan free-lancing the civil rights movement and Stoner rabble-rousing.

"I was assigned by Life to cover racial strife in St. Augustine, Fla. And northern Florida was worse than Mississippi ever was," McMillan says. "Stoner was there — he was waving a pistol around. I saw him but I didn't speak to him, not in that situation."

McMillan obviously enjoyed having the roles reversed in Atlanta before integration of the school system there.

Atlanta's progressive mayor, William B. Hartsfield, had determined that there would be no violence and

took pains to keep the event peaceful.

In an adventure that later became a sidebar story to the historic integration of Atlanta, McMillan became an ex-officio member of one of the Atlanta Police Department squads assigned by Hartsfield to keep tabs on Stoner and other potential agitators.

"We'd ride out to Marietta in the middle of the night and shine a light on his house, just to make sure he was home. It was probably illegal as hell. Then we'd yell out the windows that he better stay away from those children, that he better not come around the schools next week, and he'd get mad and come out in the yard and shake his fist at us," McMillan says.

McMillan finally found himself face-to-face with Stoner after the assassination of civil rights leader Martin Luther King Jr. in 1968.

While writing a biography of James Earl Ray, King's assassin, McMillan traveled to the federal courthouse in Knoxville, Tenn.

Stoner, an attorney, was representing Ray in an appeal.

"He was there in the corridor, wearing that Confederate flag bow tie that he always wore — a sallow little grey man with an insane grin," the writer recalls.

"I walked up to him and said, 'I hear you want to kill me.' He mumbled something about going to lunch and started to walk away. So I told him I was going to lunch with him and I did," McMillan says, laughing. "I followed him over to the Andrew Jackson Hotel and sat down and had lunch with him. J.B. was furious."

Coincidentally, Stoner and McMillan found themselves on the same airplane after changing flights in Atlanta. Stoner was heading for Savannah Beach, where he maintained a home for many years, and McMillan was returning to Frogmore via the