

A Place To Mark The Journey To Justice

Commonwealth Journal 12/13/78

By GARRY WILLS

SOME feel a vague oppression lying into Dallas. I feel it for Memphis. The first time I flew here, I went to the Lewis Funeral Home and, with two other journalists, kept vigil while undertakers, clearly audible on the other side of a thin panel, rebuilt the shot-away jaw of Dr. Martin Luther King Jr.

Things have changed. For one thing, the Democratic Party is meeting here in the South because a nonracist Southern Democrat is President of the United States. Ten years ago, that might have sounded improbable. But this is the proper place to think about the distance traveled.

Carter says he could not have been President but for King — for the changes King brought about, in the South and in the nation. But things that did not change matter, too. Dr. King made evangelical religion acceptable, almost stylish. Just those circles that might have dismissed Carter now contained people who had sung in Southern churches for the cause of civil rights.

In national politics before the 1960s, a Southern accent went normally with racism. After Dr. King, it often went with struggle, if not martyrdom, for the dispossessed.

One of the pleasures of coming to Memphis is to meet its most famous literary citizen, Shelby

Foote. Foote finds a certain symmetry in Carter's appearance at the first midterm convention held not only in the South, but in the town where Dr. King was murdered. "I wouldn't be surprised if he (Carter) thought of it as a tribute to King." Foote is the historian who showed Carter around the battlefield of Gettysburg.

WHAT BROUGHT FOOTE to this odd bend in the Mississippi? "I was the big city when I grew up 150 miles south of here. Coming here was like a French boy going to Paris. David Cohn once said, 'The Delta begins in the lobby of the Peabody Hotel and runs to Catfish Row in Vicksburg.'"

Foote's boyhood friend, novelist Walker Percy, moved about the same distance but in the opposite direction — to New Orleans.

Foote sees changes in the South, especially in race relations. But there is a tenacity of custom under change. "Memphis has not got over Mr. Crump by a long shot." Crump, the supreme city boss, won praise for the cleanliness and quietude of Memphis. "He built parks. He built beautiful libraries, but with no books in them. He built beautiful schools, but with no pay for the teachers."

The adopted son of a Crump lieutenant is mayor of Memphis, and some find Crump's attitude to

the teachers reflected in the city's attitude to policemen and firemen, who recently went on a long strike (marked, in the firemen's case, by arson). It was the intransigence toward the city's striking garbage men that brought Dr. King down here to his death.

Memories are long. Foote tells a story of Mr. Crump. "A street light was put up near the home of one of his supporters. That was before air-conditioning, and the man's pillow was just high enough for the light to hit him in the eye. He told Mr. Crump next day, and that night the light was out. But afterward he argued with Mr. Crump on a little matter, and that night the light was on."

MEMORIES OF Dr. King haunt this city, which is otherwise a gaudy shrine to Elvis Presley. The grave of Civil War hero Nathan Forrest is here — and Forrest rode with the Klan after the war.

But some things change. A new brick building is now headquarters of Local 1733 of the American Federation of State, County and Municipal Employees (AFL-CIO), the union that represents the garbage men. It is another in the endless little monuments to King's long journey toward justice, not yet ended. And no city that has a Shelby Foote in it lacks reason for pride.