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Unpunished Civil Rights Crime in Miss. Is Noted

Tarrants Case Is First Bombing Conviction

By W. F. MINOR

(Times-Picayune Staff Correspondent)

JACKSON, Miss. — Since 1964, when the first nightrider bombings rang out across the Mississippi landscape, 33 blasts have been set off in a siege of unpunished civil rights terror.

This week in a court room at Meridian, the State of Mississippi achieved in what was to have been the 34th bombing incident, a historic turning point against terrorism with explosives.

Thomas Albert Tarrants III, a youthful Klan protege, was convicted of placing a bomb last June at the home of a prominent Meridian Jewish leader who had been active in a bi-racial "Committee of Conscience."

The Tarrants verdict marked the first time the state of Mississippi has successfully prosecuted any case in the five-year reign of nightrider bombings.

LAW PASSED

Ironically, the conviction was also the first ever made under a tough law on bombing which had been passed 21 years ago this month.

The law, enacted in a package of harsh measures taken by the then governor and the Legislature to put down a violent bus company strike, hardly bears any resemblance to the situation now faced by the state.

In the context of the times that the bombing laws were written, it was not conceived that such laws would ever be used to crack down on terrorists who seek to use their own code to punish persons aiding in the civil rights cause.

The law had contemplated situations where bombs would be planted in connection with transportation facilities, railroad terminals, bus stations and public utilities, because these were

stressed in the wording of the act.

DETAILS OF ACT

But the act also mentioned "building," which could be construed to mean a house, where persons are located or goods are stored.

It provided a maximum penalty of death, if fixed by the jury upon conviction. In absence of the death penalty being assessed by the jury, the term in prison would be fixed by the court.

This is what happened in the Tarrants case. The jury brought back a guilty verdict, but did not recommend a penalty. Circuit Judge Lester Williamson fixed a 30-year sentence.

In the long line of bombings in Mississippi, the targets significantly have changed from exclusively Negroes in the beginning to whites who have shown sympathy for the civil rights cause and to members of the Jewish faith.

The initial bombings of 1964 had been a series of blasts at Negro churches and buildings used by civil rights workers.

By 1967, such targets as a Jackson Jewish temple, the home of a Methodist lay leader, the residence of a rabbi were marked for blasts.

In May, a Jewish synagogue at Meridian had been blasted with a bomb, apparently a work of terror because the Jewish community in Meridian had

joined in supporting a drive to end terror that had involved a series of Negro churches around the city.