Klan and 3 Men Fined $1-Million In Slaying of Negro in Mississippi

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VICKSBURG, Miss., Nov. 14 — A Federal District Court judge returned a $1,021,500 judgment here Wednesday against the White Knights of the Ku Klux Klan and three Natchez white men for the slaying of an aged Negro, Ben Chester White, in 1966.

The verdict was returned by a jury of eight Negroes and four whites after Judge Harold Cox directed the verdict for the plaintiff, holding that the three men were liable for "the dastardly act."

After an hour and 30 minutes the jury brought back a unanimous verdict, assessing $21,500 in actual damages and $1-million punitive damages against James L. Jones, 58 years old, Ernest Avants, 37, and Claude Fuller, 48, and the White Knights of the K.K.K.

Jones, Avants and Fuller, who have been identified by the Federal Bureau of Investigation as former members of the Klan, had been employed at the International Paper Company in Natchez at the time of the slaying of Mr. White, a 67-year-old caretaker of a farm near Natchez.

Collection Difficulties

Observers here saw little possibility of collecting any damages against the White Knights, a Mississippi-born Klan organization, now fragmented into financial disarray by constant F.B.I. pressure for the last three years.

However, the three defendants, Jones, Avants and Fuller, were believed to have some financial resources.

Klan observers in Mississippi saw the civil action taken against the three men and the White Knights as a possible new tactic to be used in cases where Mississippi justice had failed to provide satisfaction in the criminal processes.

The Federal civil suit was filed under a Reconstruction Era law involving alleged conspiracy to deprive a citizen of his civil rights. Jesse White of Baton Rouge, La., the victim's son and administrator of his estate, brought the suit.

Mr. White, who had not been connected with civil rights activities, was found dead with multiple wounds on June 10, 1966, after his body was tossed from an automobile. His battered body was riveted with 30-caliber carbine and shotgun blasts.

According to the evidence in the trial, the three men had picked up Mr. White on the pretense of seeking to give him some work. They drove him to a rural area where they stopped and opened up with their guns as he sat in the back seat of the automobile.

Confession Introduced

Introduced in the civil case here were a confession by Jones and a statement Avants had made to the F.B.I. concerning their roles in the slaying.

Avants was acquitted by a State Court jury in Natchez of murder over a year ago. Another jury was discharged after being deadlocked in the murder trial of Jones. Fuller has not been tried.

Judge Cox, in his charge to the jury, directed that the three men were responsible for the death of Mr. White. He called on the jury to set the amount of damages.