

Hub of Life-- Sudden Death

Atlanta

Churches have always been something extra special in the lives of the black Americans, and nowhere more so than in the South.

It is more than mere coincidence that the skyline of Auburn avenue, Atlanta's most famous black thoroughfare, is dominated by a church steeple and a neon message that reads "Jesus Saves," whereas the skyline of Peachtree street, Atlanta's most famous white thoroughfare, is dominated by commercial high-rises and a revolving bar.

So black Atlanta tended yesterday to see especial sacrilege in the tragedy that occurred Sunday morning at the eastern end of mile-long "Sweet Auburn" when a black youth gunned down Mrs. Martin Luther King Sr. in the church so often preached.

That she should have been sitting at the organ playing "The Lord's Prayer," that the gunman should have attacked from the soulful "Amen Corner," that he should have been wrestled to the ground on the very spot where the King family hopes to establish a center for the study of non-violent social change—these were "things uncomprehensible," to use the words of one of the avenue's most famous clergymen, the Rev. William H. Borders.

Pastor of Wheat Street Baptist Church for 37 years (Auburn avenue once was known as Wheat street), the Rev. Mr. Borders called the tragedy "the worst thing to happen here in my entire life, even worse than Martin's assassination." He explained, almost preached, his voice rising and falling rhythmically:

"Dr. King's sweetness came from her. She was sweet to the point of innocence, as choice as any woman who ever lived.

"Mama King was the soul, the backbone of the King family.

Maybe the world didn't know that, but folks on Auburn did."

To be "sweet" on Auburn avenue is to be special.

Half a century ago, when the avenue was the center of black business activity in a much smaller Atlanta, commerce was so brisk and lucrative there that someone dubbed the street "Sweet Auburn." Its merchants, bankers and insurance men somehow became more adept at making money than blacks elsewhere in the country, thus laying the foundation for a black middle class that is today the largest in America.

The churches grew with the avenue — Big Bethel AME, its steeple soaring above the barbershops, the

savings and loans, the barbecue places, the lawyers, doctors, addicts and prostitutes; Wheat Street Baptist, hulking over a surrounding collection of row tenements and victorian frame houses, and finally, Ebenezer Baptist, founded by the father of the woman slain Sunday, with twin steeples of red brick, oak pews as hard as any sinner's heart and an "Amen Corner" as sweet as any in town.

In Ebenezer, the amen corner is to the right front of the congregation. As in most churches, anyone moved to chant an occasional, spontaneous "amen" or "say it, brother," may sit there.

It is, as the Rev. Mr. Borders says, "a spiritual sounding board that the pastor bounces his message against, an uncoordinated cheering section filled with the spirit of the upper room, a whip-it-up place."

It is one of the last places on earth one would expect to find a gunman.

There was a widespread feeling here yesterday that, shock as the killing was, matters could have been worse.

"If that gunman had been white instead of black, this town would have come apart," Warren Cochrane, an Auburn avenue businessman said.