

Friends Recall Bingham: A 'Strong Social Conscience'

By STEVEN V. ROBERTS

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LOS ANGELES, Aug. 31—Stephen Mitchell Bingham was arrested in Clarksdale, Miss., in 1963 while helping blacks to register to vote.

Today, he was charged with five counts of murder. Officials allege that he smuggled a gun into San Quentin prison and gave it to George Jackson. The authorities say that Jackson used the gun in an escape attempt in which he and five others were killed.

Friends and the family of Mr. Bingham, a 29-year-old Oakland lawyer, insist that he is too smart and too opposed to violence to become involved in such a plot. But they also say that he has sympathy for those who believe that racism and injustice can be eradicated only through armed revolution.

Stephen Bingham is the heir to an impressive political heritage. His grandfather, Hiram Bingham, served as a Senator from Connecticut and as Governor of the state. His father, Alfred Bingham, now a Connecticut lawyer, was an outspoken advocate of Progressivism in the nineteen-thirties. His uncle, Jonathan B. Bingham, is

a member of the House of Representatives from New York.

After six years at Milton Academy, Mr. Bingham entered Yale in 1960. Teachers there recall his "strong social conscience" and a limited interest in academic matters. A former woman acquaintance remembers him as "politically naive and very impressionable."

"He was easily swayed to political emotionalism without getting his facts straight," she said. "He was very concerned with getting on the inside of any group, of being in the know," she said.

When the civil rights movement emerged, Mr. Bingham wrote an article in The Yale Daily News urging students to

go to Mississippi. "For until the black people of Mississippi and the rest of the South—and North—are free, we shall not be free," he wrote.

Mr. Bingham's father, who flew to California last week "to stand behind" his son, noted that Stephen had gone South himself. "He has always shown courage and a willingness to take risks on behalf of what he believes in," the elder Mr. Bingham told a news conference.

"He thinks I'm a square and a liberal, which is almost an epithet with him," he added. "I think he's a romantic. He inherited some of the best and some of the worst qualities of his missionaries ancestors."

After graduating from Yale, Mr. Bingham entered Boalt Hall, the law school of the University of California at Berkeley. But after a year he dropped out and joined the Peace Corps with his new wife, the former Gretchen Spreckles, a member of a prominent West Coast family.

Two Years in Africa

The couple spent two years in the primitive back country of Sierra Leone, in West Africa. Not long after their return, they got a divorce and Mr. Bingham returned to law school.

There, he took up the cause of farm workers who were trying to organize a union in the

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San Joaquin Valley. In 1968 he was arrested during a sit-in protesting the university's refusal to stop buying table grapes.

Alfred Bingham specializes in real estate and wills. When Stephen finished law school, he joined a group of young lawyers who saw their role as serving the needs of "the movement" and the poor.

As a staff attorney for Berkeley Neighborhood Legal Services, he defended teen-age run-aways arrested by the police. After joining a law firm in Oakland earlier this year, he helped to organize "radical caucuses" within local labor unions.

From his days in Mississippi and West Africa, Mr. Bingham retained a particular interest in black problems. Last Christmas he gave his father a copy of "Soledad Brother," a book of letters written by George Jackson, one of three black convicts accused of murdering a guard in Soledad Prison.

Last April, when the three "Soledad Brothers" appeared for a hearing, a scuffle broke out in the courtroom. Three men were arrested, including an ex-convict named James Carr. Mr. Bingham agreed to defend Carr and several times in recent weeks visited Jackson in San Quentin, ostensibly to discuss the Carr case.