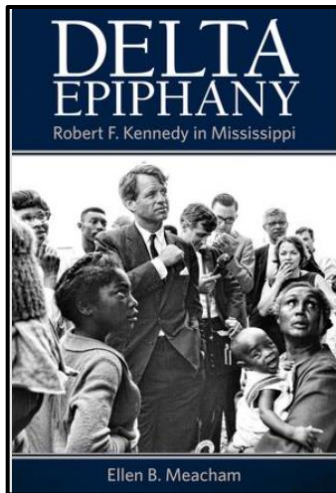


TRANSCRIPT

“*Delta Epiphany* Spotlights Robert F. Kennedy’s Enduring Social Change Legacy”
(Online Audio Documentary)

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This is Regina L. Burns for Harvest Reapers Communications in Dallas.

Sen. Robert F. Kennedy’s 1967 trip to the Mississippi Delta resulted in food and financial assistance for the starving people he met. It later influenced federal legislation, as well as social change initiatives, according to [Ellen Meacham’s](#) 2018 celebrated book. “[Delta Epiphany: Robert F. Kennedy in Mississippi.](#)”

During his March 16, 1968, presidential campaign announcement, Kennedy sought change —quote— “in the disastrous, divisive policies of the nation ...,” —end quote— according to Meacham’s book. —Quote— “... closing the gap between black and white, rich and poor, between old and young” —end quote— were also on his presidential agenda.

Tragically, he was [assassinated](#) June 6, [1968](#).

Let’s look at the impact of RFK’s trip to Mississippi.

On April 9, 1967, Kennedy arrived in Jackson, Mississippi, to lead an anti-poverty, fact-finding tour. Kennedy’s visit changed his life, the lives of the Mississippians he met in 1967, and history.

Marian Wright’s Plea for Help

Kennedy went to Mississippi in response to NAACP Legal Defense and Educational Fund attorney [Marian Wright’s testimony](#) that people were starving in Mississippi. Wright compelled the U.S. senators to act during a War on Poverty hearing in Washington, D.C., March 15, 1967. When she shared the heartbreaking reality that faced families in the Mississippi Delta, Wright was 27 years old and the first woman to pass the Mississippi bar exam, Meacham wrote. Furthermore, Wright was one of five Black attorneys in the entire state of Mississippi, at that time, according to Meacham’s book.

Meacham, who teaches journalism at The University of Mississippi, recounted Kennedy’s 1967 visit to Mississippi and the impact on the starving people in the Delta as well as the subsequent, hard-won improvements to anti-poverty programs.

War on Poverty Hearing

Kennedy and three other U.S. senators, including Joseph Clark, D-Pennsylvania, held an [April 10, 1967, hearing in Jackson, Mississippi](#), to find out whether War on Poverty programs were successful. Meacham examined and explained various factors that contributed to the ineffectiveness, such as segregation and Jim Crow laws, politics, the requirement to buy food stamps, changes in farming and sharecropping, among many others.

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Ellen Meacham’s 2018 Dallas Appearance and Interview

“Delta Epiphany” also shines a light on the civil rights movement guided by Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. as well as Kennedy’s record as attorney general. I asked Meacham about King’s and Kennedy’s relationship when she stopped in [Dallas in June 2018](#) during a Press Club of Dallas Foundation event at The Sixth Floor Museum at Dealey Plaza.

1--SOUNDBITE Ellen Meacham: “And, so I ... such a threat.”

Fannie Lou Hamer and Unita Blackwell

Meacham’s research included reviewing records of Wright’s and other speakers’ testimonies from the 1967 Mississippi hearing. Famed civil rights activist [Fannie Lou Hamer](#), from Ruleville in the Mississippi Delta, was among the speakers. Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee leader [Unita Blackwell](#) also addressed the lawmakers. She told them about the financial devastation Mississippi Delta families endured as a result of changes in the –quote– “agricultural economy”–end quote–. According to “Delta Epiphany,” Blackwell said, –quote– “We have children who never had a glass of milk. We had children who had never saw a toy”–end quote–. Unita Blackwell became the [first elected African American female mayor](#) in Mississippi.

Sen. Joseph Clark, D-Pennsylvania

Despite a busy day at the Mississippi hearing, Kennedy made time to speak to students at [Millsaps](#) and [Tougaloo](#) colleges. According to Meacham’s book, the New York senator and [Joseph Clark](#) were the only visiting lawmakers to fly to Greenville in the Mississippi Delta that next day, April 11, 1967. They talked to people struggling to survive at Freedom City as well as Greenville. Kennedy queried everyone about their food availability, and he listened.

Marian Wright rode in the car with Kennedy during the 38-mile-trip to Cleveland. Kennedy’s aide, Peter Edelman, who later married Wright, was also in the vehicle, driven by a federal marshal, according to “Delta Epiphany.”

Amzie Moore

Civil rights activist and NAACP leader [Amzie Moore](#) escorted Kennedy in Cleveland. Kennedy shook the hand of a Black child, which was –quote– “a shocking thing for a white man to do in 1967 in Mississippi” –end quote–.

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Charlie Dillard

That child was 9-year-old [Charlie Dillard](#). Kennedy asked Charlie’s grandmother, Fanny Dillard, lots of questions about what she fed Charlie and his siblings. Kennedy was horrified to learn bread and syrup, twice a day, was her answer. That was all the food she had, according to Meacham’s research.

Annie White

Besides Dillard, Meacham’s book captured the stories and showed the photographs of some of the other people Kennedy met. [Annie White](#) and her children lived in a –quote– “shack” –end quote– in Cleveland. It had –quote– “one faucet for running water in a sink in a back room, but no flush toilet, just a hole in the floor on the back porch and no electricity” –end quote–.

When Kennedy got to her shack, White was using a washboard to clean clothes. Kennedy gave the eldest boys a silver John F. Kennedy half-dollar coin. They immediately rushed to a nearby store to spend their newfound wealth. Meacham painstakingly writes about Kennedy’s attempt to connect with one of the other children.

David White

Twenty-month-old David White was malnourished and underweight. He grabbed every scrap of cornbread and rice he could eat off the dirty floor he was on. Kennedy tried to get the child’s attention by touching and speaking to him, but David White’s only goal was to eat whatever he could find. Stunned to see a child suffering, Kennedy appeared to wipe tears from his eyes when he left the shack, according to Meacham’s book.

Michael White

During her Dallas presentation at The Sixth Floor Museum, Meacham introduced the audience to one of Annie White’s other children, Michael White, who attended the event. I asked Michael White about Kennedy’s April 11, 1967, visit to his childhood home in Cleveland.

2--SOUNDBITE Michael White: “Well, this happened when I was ... day and time.”

During that 2018 interview, Michael White told me why he settled in Dallas, Texas.

3--SOUNDBITE Michael White: “Well, it was a place ... here for 30 years.”

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Dan Guravich, Melinda and David Guravich

Meacham told the Dallas audience that she made it a priority to find out what happened to the people Kennedy met. She knocked on doors and that paid off. She discovered never-before-published photographs of Kennedy and some of the people he met, taken by Mississippi-based photographer [Dan Guravich](#). Meacham explained finding a Dallas connection that led to her using Guravich’s photographs on the front and back covers of her book. Dan Guravich died in 1997. His daughter-in-law, [Melinda Guravich](#), is married to Dan’s son, David, and they’re based in the Dallas area.

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Melinda Guravich, who also attended Meacham’s presentation that June day, told me during a 2018 interview how her late father-in-law’s photographs were discovered. She began with Kennedy’s assessment of his anti-poverty tour.

4--SOUNDBITE Melinda Guravich: “And was horrified ... assortment of pictures.”

Meacham also used several other photographs inside her book taken by Dan Guravich.

5--SOUNDBITE Melinda Guravich: “How did the pictures ... context of history.”



Kennedy Acts

After he returned home from Mississippi, Kennedy told his family, staff, and anyone who would listen about the horrible human hunger and poverty he had witnessed in the Mississippi Delta. According to Meacham’s book, Kennedy personally telephoned his network to send aid. Kennedy’s visit eventually generated help for the people in Mississippi. Meacham wrote that it was a decade, however, before those receiving food stamps no longer had to buy them; that’s one of the improvements implemented by the [Food Stamp Act of 1977](#).

Kennedy’s influence continues around anti-hunger legislation, policies, and social change. [Peter Edelman](#) said, —quote— “What Robert Kennedy began in Mississippi led to a remarkable and successful national program that fights hunger and has made a major difference for millions upon millions of our people ...” —end quote—.

In addition, Marian Wright and Peter Edelman married in McLean, Virginia in July 1968. Together, they championed the poor and social justice issues. Their union is a direct result of Kennedy’s “Delta Epiphany.”

I’m Regina L. Burns, reporting for Harvest Reapers Communications, in Dallas.

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