

# Q&A: Curtis Wilkie discusses his new book 'When Evil Lived in Laurel: The White Knights and the Murder of Vernon Dahmer'



by **Adam Ganucheau**  
July 9, 2021



Curtis Wilkie works in his office at University of Mississippi in late 2020. (Photo by Billy Schuerman/The Daily Mississippian.) Credit: Billy Schuerman/The Daily Mississippian

## Listen to this article



Curtis Wilkie, the 81-year-old Mississippi native and veteran journalist who recently released his new book “When Evil Lived in Laurel: The White Knights and the Murder of Vernon Dahmer,” will be a featured guest at the Mississippi Book Festival on Aug. 21.

Ahead of his visit to Jackson, Wilkie spoke with Mississippi Today’s Adam Ganucheau about the book in a virtual conversation hosted by **Friendly City Books, the state’s newest bookstore located in downtown Columbus.**

Below is the transcript of that conversation, which has been edited for length and clarity.

**Click here to hear the entire conversation**, which includes a reflection on the life and legacy of Vernon Dahmer from Mississippi activist Jarrius Adams.

**Adam Ganucheau:** Not that he needs an introduction for anyone here, but I do want to read just a short one just to get us primed for this conversation. Curtis Wilkie, a native of Pike County, Mississippi, covered many civil rights happenings in Mississippi during the 1960s. Later as a correspondent for the Boston Globe, he continued to cover the later days of the movement, and many of the continued civil rights stories in Mississippi and across the South over the next few decades.

In 2007 he came back home to Oxford, where he served as professor of journalism and fellow at the Overby Center for Journalism and Politics for several years before his retirement just last year. He’s the author of several books, including “The Road to Camelot: Inside JFK’s Five-Year Campaign”, “The Fall of the House of Zeus” and “Dixie: A Personal Odyssey Through Events That Shaped the Modern South.”

And today, of course, we’re here to talk about Curtis’s newest book, “When Evil Lived in Laurel: The White Knights and the Murder of Vernon Dahmer.” Curtis, it’s an honor for me to be talking with you about your latest book, about your latest work. Thank you so much for being here with us.

**Curtis Wilkie:** Adam, thank you. It's always fun to be with you guys.

**Ganucheau:** Curtis, I want to ask you to sort of tell us a little bit about the book, but I want to prompt you with the first words in the book that you wrote. It's a quote attributed to Edmund Burke: "The only thing necessary for the triumph of evil is for good men to do nothing."

As the title of this book suggests, this is a story about a very good man in Vernon Dahmer, and of course the events leading up to and the fallout after his tragic murder. The book is about another very good man in Tom Landrum, and one very evil man in Sam Bowers.

Curtis, tell us just a little bit more about these three sort of main characters in the book, and a little bit about their stories.

**Wilkie:** Thank you, Adam... Vernon Dahmer was probably better known in south Mississippi at the time that he was active. I was a young reporter in the Delta and I can't remember whether I had heard of him before his death. I certainly became aware of him following the murder. It was just another one of these awful things that went on in the south and in Mississippi in the sixties. He's basically an unsung hero. I think he deserves a greater reputation than he has nationally because of the work he did and it cost him his life to do it. I covered the final trial of Sam Bowers when he was convicted in 1998, and during that, I spent some time with the Dahmer family, particularly with his wife Ella Dahmer and Vernon Dahmer Jr. And they just had such grace through all of this. And so I always appreciated their help back when I was in Hattiesburg, covering the trial of Bowers. Bowers was truly an evil guy. He was the imperial wizard of the White Knights and they were the worst of the worst of the klan.

Bowers lived in Laurel, he was not from Laurel originally, but he was a Mississippian with all sorts of distorted ideas about race and religion. He actually developed a crazy philosophy called Christian militancy, that basically authorized murder and terror, according to his perverted view of life, you know, it was perfectly acceptable. So he was one particularly bad, bad guy.

The third person who's a major figure in the book is a man named Tom Landrum who was, you know, he was at the time a 33-year youth court counselor in Jones County. And he was approached by a friend of his who was a local FBI agent who asked him if he'd be willing to join the White Knights in order to report on their activities.

And Tom was so troubled by what was going on in his home community that he agreed to do that. And he did for four years, filed any number of literally hundreds of reports, all of that was eventually made available to me. And you know, that forms the basic raw materials for the book that I was able to flesh out with all sorts of valuable FBI documents that are available at the University of Southern Mississippi library. But in the course of writing it, Adam, I always like to have an epigraph at start up a book, pick up something that is wise and hope relevant to the book.

And at some point I came to that Burke quote, which I had always liked. It's a famous quote. I thought it was just so very applicable here that, you know, you had a situation that involved certainly evil, but it also involved some very good people and two good men, who would have been Vernon Dahmer and Tom Landrum. So that's that's how I approached it. It's kind of a battle of good versus evil. You've got almost pure good, and you've got pure evil.

**Ganucheau:** You know, the book is compelling. The many stories that you've just laid out for us and, of course the book itself, I think, is really important right now. Curtis, as I was reading the book, I was thinking a lot about this moment that we find ourselves in America... I thought a lot about last summer, the murder of George Floyd and how that inspired sort of this national reckoning on racism that many people have suggested has not been matched since the 1960s when, of course, this story is set.

I haven't talked to you about this, but I assume you were either in the throws of finishing the writing and reporting of this book, or at least in the editing process last summer. What did that moment mean to you? And as readers now, as we are going through this work of yours, as we're sort of learning more about the story of Tom Landrum and Vernon Dahmer and what happens in the late 60s in Laurel, what do you think we should take from it? And what did you personally take from sort of telling this story in a moment such as this?

**Wilkie:** Well, I suddenly realized that I started on this project in 2018, probably two years before all these other events that crystallized and these movements that are going on today. And before I had finished, I realized how relevant this story is to our current time — that it has a strong consciousness about race and race relations.

And suddenly once again, we're seeing efforts being made by elected public officials to suppress the vote, especially of Black people, people they anticipate, are going to vote a particular way. And it seems to fly in the face of democracy just as the suppression that went on, you know, in the bad old days. You know, it didn't start in 1960, it started with Jim Crow

and all of the periods after Reconstruction. So it'd been going on in this state for 70 or 80 years until, the 1960s... Vernon Dahmer dedicated his life to, and it cost him his life.

**Ganucheau:** Sure. You know, getting back to the story a little bit, I am very intrigued by how this story sort of came to you. For you as the author, walk us through that. I think it's incredibly compelling. I think it gives some insight into the writing process and the creative process that you've been through the last few years with this project. I do think that the genesis of it is compelling. Tell us just a little bit about how this came to you.

**Wilkie:** Yeah, sure. It's not part of the narrative of the story. The story basically takes place from 1965 until 1969. I was approached in 2018, kind of secretly through a couple of middlemen, if you will, between the Landrum family and me. The Landrum family was searching for someone to write about Tom Landrum and what he had done. Tom was still living at the time, he had been identified in a book that was privately published and not a whole lot of people read it, but the book did identify Tom Landrum as a member of the klan. And he was troubled by that because his role had been secret for all of these years and he didn't want that to be part of his legacy. He had not even told his children about this. So, his wife who had typed up all of his notes and journals that were sent to the FBI, she had very wisely saved carbon copies of them. And they had saved this material. And so they were able to draw up on this.

They just had this incredible, account, if you will, of Tom's experiences at klan meetings. He talks about quarrels and disagreement among the klansmen, their plots to target people, or home burnings. He knew almost from the outset that Vernon Dahmer was going to be targeted, but he didn't know when.

I think certainly the FBI was aware that Dahmer was a prime target, but no one knew. Of course when the White Knights finally decided to strike, they did it very suddenly and spontaneously and just a handful of members actually took part in the raid and the others didn't even know about it, and there was some resentment among them, we learned from Landrum's journals.

In some cases, the sentiment among the various klansman was deep resentment. Some had not been told about it. Others were so troubled that they had gone so far as to commit murders and drop out of the klan. The Landrum papers were invaluable to me until finally, I was taken down to the Landrum family home right outside of Laurel and met with the family. They were kind of vetting me and I was, you know, receptive to whatever they might have to offer. And

then once I guess they trusted me, they shared with me these incredible journals. And once I took a look at it, I said to myself, oh my God, you know, you've got another book on your hands.

**Ganucheau:** That's an incredible story. As a journalist that's the stuff you dream about.

**Wilkie:** Yeah, so you always like to have something presented to you on a platter, it's not always that easy. But it involved a great deal of other research. And unfortunately, you know, there's not a lot of people still living who lived through that period.

I'm old enough to remember it myself. But so many of the people who were involved in the story are no longer living, not only the Klansman but some of the good people who tried to bring about justice. You know, the one person who's pretty well-known in Mississippi, who is still living, is Judge Charles Pickering, who was a county prosecuting attorney in Jones County at the time. Judge Pickering was very helpful to me in this research.

**Ganucheau:** As a journalist, you know, the Landrum papers I know were sort of, the key part of your storytelling and your reporting and writing process, but besides just the Landrum papers, what else went into this? I seem to recall FBI files, you had to pore over many interviews. I mean, what all goes into writing a book like this that's sort of so journalistically focused.

**Wilkie:** It helps to have some familiarity with the story and idea because, you know, I lived in Mississippi and was a young journalist in the 60s. But more importantly for my own personal background was, you know, the fact that I covered the final trial of Sam Bowers and had met with the Dahmer family and, you know, I spent been a lot of time on that story.

I had written several stories leading up to the trial and then covered every minute of the trial and its aftermath, which, the trial itself lasted at least a week as I recall. In fact, I wrote a book 20 years ago called Dixie, and it was my intention when I started writing that book that the book would open with the trial of (Byron) De La Beckwith, who had murdered Medgar Evers, and it took more than 30 years to finally convict him, but that was done in 1994 in Jackson. So that was going to be the beginning of that book, and it was going to end with the trial and conviction of Sam Bowers.

And as I was writing that book, my friend Willie Morris, who had been such an inspiration to me, died. And that just seemed to finally close the closest circle on what I was trying to write

about. So, the Bowers trial became the next to last chapter in my book, Dixie. So I knew a bit about the story and, you know, the evil Sam Bowers. I had to one brief encounter with him.

It was jury selection and judge let the reporters come into his chamber while the various lawyers were selecting the members of the jury. And we all sat around this big long table. And as we sat down, I realized I'm sitting next to the imperial wizard himself. And I notice he's got on Mickey Mouse pins, two of them, on each lapel.

And, at first I said, "Excuse me, Mr. Bowers. What's with the Mickey Mouse?" And he looked at me and he put his finger to his lips and shook his head as if to say, "I'm not talking to you." And it was a silence he maintained for the whole trial. He never opened his mouth during the trial.

So I never got a chance to talk to him. I did talk some to his very inept lawyer, Travis Buckley, who was a klansman himself. And some of the key figures in the book were witnesses at that trial including Billy Roy Pitts, who went on the raid and he testified against Bowers.

It was really Bowers' chief lieutenant testified on behalf of Bowers, so I had seen these characters in action, too. So all of that, that helped immensely.

**Ganucheau:** Sure. Curtis I know I talked to you many times about it. I've read accounts, you know, Dixie has plenty of this in it. You were good friends with a lot of these, you know, civil rights activists. Some of the most influential people who were fighting for voting rights in the 60s in Mississippi. Of course Aaron Henry being a close friend and mentor of yours.

**Wilkie:** Yeah, absolutely.

**Ganucheau:** Did you have a chance to meet Vernon Dahmer?

**Wilkie:** No, I never did. Unfortunately I didn't, but you know, Vernon Dahmer and Aaron Henry struck me as being very, very similar. Vernon Dahmer would have been a little bit older, but they were both NAACP and the movement was not a monolithic, you know, there were rival organizations, just like there were rival klan groups. And both Vernon Dahmer and Aaron Henry were very willing to work with the young turks in the movement to sometimes more scornful about the NAACP. You know, particularly people from SNCC, the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee, and both Vernon Dahmer and Aaron Henry welcomed

these young people to help them.

And they tried to help the young people and Vernon Dahmer even had a couple of SNCC people living on his land for a while, while they were engaged in voter registration activity in Forrest County.

**Ganucheau:** Another thing that I'm kind of curious about that came to me as I was reading this, is you just talked a lot about sort of your personal experience as a journalist at the time of the Dahmer murder. But I wondered, you know, being in Clarksdale at the time, this tumultuous time certainly for race relations in Mississippi, did you have any run-ins yourself with the klan, and did that help you as you were writing this book?

**Wilkie:** Happily, not really in Clarksdale. The Citizens Council, essentially, represented, the strategists for the segregationists, and they felt that the klan was counterproductive. And so they tried to tamp down any kind of violence. We had plenty of suppression that went on there, and the Clarksdale police force was pretty terrible at the time. But my one brush with the klan at that time was taken place in the summer of '64.

The first arrests made under the Civil Rights Act were made in Greenwood. There was a Black guy who tried to cross a klan picket line at the local theater to attend the theater, which he was now legally able to do because of the passage of the Civil Rights Act, and he was beaten up. And so the FBI quickly came in and arrested three people from Greenwood and brought them to Clarksdale, which was the federal jail for that part of the Delta.

And there I am, at my office at the Clarksdale newspaper and I get called up by the Associated Press. And they say, "Curtis, you know, if you get a picture of these guys, you know, you get our fee of \$10" or something. Which was big money at the time. So I picked up the newspaper camera and went to the jail where ordinarily, I would have known everybody there from the sheriff to the jailer and the deputies and whatever.

I walked in that jail, and I didn't recognize anyone. The jail had suddenly been taken over by the klan from Greenwood, and Greenwood was a tough town and that's where (Byron) De La Beckwith came from. And I was not exactly a profile in courage, I have to admit. I was immediately asked in brusque tones, "What do you want, boy?"

And I said, "Well, from the Press Register and I was wondering if Mr. Bell might want his picture taken." That was the name of one of the guys who had been arrested. And they said,



“Mr. Bell don’t want no picture took.” And I knew right away, you know, who they were and what they were up to. And I said, “Thank you very much.” And I got the hell out of there.

So, you know, that was my one direct encounter with the klan during that period. Although, you know, we certainly had plenty of trouble into Delta, but in and around Clarksdale there were no murders, so far as I know, no bombings or burnings. But you know, a great deal of official suppression, plus demonstrations from the civil rights people, a lot of activity, but it didn’t get as bad as it did in parts of south Mississippi, including my home county Pike County where they had it bad.

They became known as the church burning capital of the world. Something like 25 black churches that were either burned or bombed because they had voting registration activity in those churches.

**Ganucheau:** Sure. You know, one thing that came through in this book — this sort of inside, you know, behind the scenes, look at the workings of the klan at the time showed just kind of how inept and unintelligent these people were. You know, I know there were plenty of tragedies, most of all the Dahmer murder being one of those main ones, but it came through, Curtis, that just they were really bad at the things that they wanted to accomplish.

**Wilkie:** I guess that’s a good thing. You know, if there’s anything that distinguishes this book from so many other good books had been written about this period, it’s that... I hope it did it justice in kind of describing in great detail, the actual meetings and the actual people in it and their crazy characteristics and their incredible stupidity and foolishness. They botched one mission after another. These were not a bunch of rocket scientists at work here. They were largely a bunch of bumblers. They even botched the raid on the Dahmer home and store, though, of course, they achieved their purpose of killing him. But in the process they left behind all sorts of evidence that could easily be traced to them. One character, Billy Roy Pitts, loved cowboy movies so he had styled himself a quick draw pistol, a holster, and he put his pistol in it.

And during all the excitement at the Dahmers, it fell out and he left it behind. Another character who was in the car with Billy Roy Pitts, his name was Lightning Smith. They were in two cars, four people in each car, one car burned a grocery down. The other one burned the Dahmer home down. The car that burned the store down is pulling out and, you know, they’re the only two cars down there. Lightning Smith in the other car thinks it must be to police. So he shoots out the tires of the other car and they have to abandon the other car and know

suddenly you've got eight weighty, you know, not particularly small klansman, all crowded into one car, trying to flee the scene of the crime. And if it were not such a tragedy, it'd be, you know, great comedy.

## ADAM GANUCHEAU

---

✉ [adam@mississippitoday.org](mailto:adam@mississippitoday.org)

Adam Ganuchau, as Mississippi Today's editor-in-chief, oversees the newsroom and works with the editorial team to fulfill our mission of producing high-quality journalism in the public interest. Adam has covered politics and state government for Mississippi Today since February 2016. A native of Hazlehurst, Adam has worked as a staff reporter for AL.com, The Birmingham News and The Clarion-Ledger and his work has appeared in The New York Times, The Washington Post and Atlanta Journal-Constitution. Adam earned his bachelor's in journalism from the University of Mississippi.

**More by Adam Ganuchau**