

Medgar Evers' killer, Byron De La Beckwith

January 23, 2001

By Timothy R. Brown
Associated Press writer

JACKSON, Miss. -- Byron De La Beckwith, 80, the white supremacist convicted after three decades and three trials of assassinating civil-rights leader Medgar Evers, died Sunday night at University Medical Center.

He had been taken to the hospital from his prison cell, where he had been serving a life sentence.

Hospital spokeswoman Barbara Austin would not comment on the cause of death, saying that would be for the coroner to determine. Beckwith had a history of high blood pressure, heart problems and other ailments.

Evers, 37, an NAACP field secretary who pushed for an end to segregation, was shot in the back June 12, 1963, after stepping out of his Oldsmobile. He was walking to his house with an armful of "Jim Crow Must Go" T-shirts.

The slaying haunted the Evers family, Charles Evers, a veteran civil-rights activist, said in a telephone interview Monday.

"What do you say? Finally, it is all over," Evers said. "I don't want to say anything negative about him because we know what he did."

Beckwith's philosophy left no room for non-whites.

Beckwith said that although he was "not willing to lay my life down to rid evil from this country," he was "willing to kill the evil in this country that would try to push me out."

Beckwith wore a Confederate flag pin on his lapel throughout the 15 days of jury selection, testimony and deliberation of the 1994 trial that sent him to prison.

The deer rifle used to kill Evers was found in a nearby empty lot and Beckwith's fingerprint was found on it. But the former fertilizer salesman insisted he was 90 miles away in Greenwood when Evers was killed.

Two all-white juries deadlocked in trials in 1964.

Three years later, Beckwith ran for lieutenant governor and finished fifth among six candidates with more than 34,000 votes. In 1973, he was convicted of possessing dynamite without a permit and served five years in prison.

Twelve years ago, Evers' widow, Myrlie Evers Williams, asked that the case be reopened. Bobby DeLaughter,

who was Hinds County assistant district attorney at the time, agreed, even though he faced daunting challenges. "At the very beginning... we didn't have anything," DeLaughter said. "The D.A.'s file was nowhere to be found. We did not have the benefit of a trial transcript to know who the witnesses were. None of the evidence had been retained by the court."

However, DeLaughter and his officers stumbled across new evidence, including negatives of photos of the crime scene and new witnesses who testified Beckwith had bragged to them about "beating the system."

At Beckwith's final trial, eight of the 12 jurors were black. He was convicted of murder, and the Mississippi Supreme Court upheld the decision in 1997.

The Clarion-Ledger of Jackson, Miss., reported in 1989 that secret files of the Mississippi Sovereignty Commission indicated it aided Beckwith's defense in his second trial by screening potential jurors. The commission, a state agency formed to safeguard segregation in Mississippi, detailed jurors' racial views and their ancestry and listed those likely to be "fair and impartial," including a white member of the pro-segregation Citizens' Council, a group Beckwith joined in 1954.



Byron De La Beckwith, right, is shown with his wife, Thelma, in this in 1994 photo in Batesville, Miss. Beckwith, convicted assassin of civil rights leader Medgar Evers in 1963, died Sunday night, Jan. 21, 2001. (AP Photo)

Death of an Assassin

Medgar Evers' Assassin Dead at 80

The Associated Press

JACKSON, Miss., Jan. 22 — Byron De La Beckwith, convicted assassin of civil rights leader Medgar Evers in 1963, died Sunday night after he was transferred from his jail cell to a hospital. He was 80.

Barbara Austin, a hospital spokeswoman, said Beckwith entered University Medical Center at 2:07 p.m. CDT. She could not elaborate on his ailment or the cause of death.

"It's a matter for the coroner's office to determine," she said.

Shot in the Back

Evers, a 37-year-old NAACP field secretary who pushed for an end to segregation, had stepped out of his Oldsmobile when he was shot in the back on June 12, 1963. He was walking to his house with an armful of "Jim Crow Must Go" T-shirts.

Beckwith was convicted at a third trial in 1994 after two mistrials three decades earlier. After his conviction, he was sentenced to life imprisonment.

His fingerprint was found on a deer rifle used to kill Evers. It was abandoned in the lot across the street. But the former fertilizer salesman insisted he was 90 miles away in Greenwood when Evers was murdered.

Two all-white juries deadlocked in trials in 1964. Twelve years ago, Evers' widow, Myrlie Evers Williams, asked for the case to be reopened, and Hinds County District Attorney Bobby DeLaughter agreed.

"At the very beginning ... we didn't have anything," DeLaughter said. "The DA's file was nowhere to be found. We did not have the benefit of a trial transcript to know who the witnesses were. None of the evidence had been retained by the court."

New Evidence, New Witnesses Bagged Beckwith
But DeLaughter and his officers stumbled across new evidence, including negatives from the crime scene and new witnesses who testified Beckwith had bragged to them "about beating the system."

Beckwith was arrested Dec. 17, 1990, and when he stood in front of a new jury in 1994, he was 74 years old.

His prosecutors were armed with new evidence and a 127-page document claiming 21 errors were made in Beckwith's original trial. Also, eight of the 12 jurors were black.

Beckwith, a white supremacist, wore a Confederate flag pin on his lapel throughout the 15 days of jury selection, testimony and deliberation.

He was found guilty of murder and the Mississippi Supreme Court upheld the decision in 1997.
Beckwith is survived by his wife and a son. ■

Assassination Chronology

A chronology of events in the 1963 sniper slaying of civil rights figure Medgar Evers:

June 12, 1963: Mississippi NAACP field secretary Medgar Evers is shot in the back and killed about 12:30 a.m. in his driveway.

June 21, 1963: Byron De La Beckwith is arrested by FBI agents on a civil rights charge in connection with the slaying.

July 2, 1963: A Hinds County grand jury indicts Beckwith for murder.

Feb. 7, 1964: A mistrial is declared, with the all-white jury deadlocked 6-6.

April 17, 1964: Another mistrial is declared, with the all-white jury deadlocked 8-4 to acquit.

Oct. 1, 1989: The Clarion-Ledger in Jackson reports that secret files of the Mississippi Sovereignty Commission show it aided Beckwith's defense in his second 1964 trial by screening potential jurors. The commission detailed jurors' racial views and their ancestry, and listed those likely to be "fair and impartial," including a white Citizens' Council member. "Fair" jurors made the panel; those with "improper thinking" did not.

Oct. 31, 1989: County District Attorney Ed Peters announces he will let a grand jury decide if jury tampering took place.

Nov. 26, 1989: The Clarion-Ledger reports that secret files of the Sovereignty Commission show late Gov. J.P. Coleman asked the commission in 1958 to spy on "race agitator" Medgar Evers to catch him in an illegal act.

Nov. 26, 1989: Officials say much of the evidence in the Evers case is missing. Included are the 30.06 rifle used to kill Evers and a transcript of Beckwith's first trial.

Dec. 14, 1989: The district attorney's office says it found no evidence of jury tampering in the Evers case.

May 2, 1990: The Clarion-Ledger reports that a 15-year-old book has provided county prosecutors with a possible break in reopening the Evers case. "Klandestine," by William McIlhany, details the memories of former Ku Klux Klan officer Delmar Dennis, who became an FBI informant. The book says Beckwith admitted to Dennis he had killed Evers.

June 19, 1990: The Clarion-Ledger reports that the rifle used to kill Evers is not missing. Prosecutors admitted they had the gun, saying they kept its whereabouts a secret for strategic reasons.

Oct. 12, 1990: Evers' widow, Myrlie Evers, brings county prosecutors a critical item needed to reopen the case: The 963-page, three-volume transcript of Beckwith's first trial in 1964.

Dec. 14, 1990: A grand jury again indicts Beckwith.

Dec. 17, 1990: Beckwith is arrested at his home at Signal Mountain, Tenn.

Feb. 5, 1994: After the third trial, Beckwith is found guilty of murder and sentenced to life in prison.

The Associated Press