

1959

FIRST WADE-IN

WHAT HAPPENED?

On May 14, 1959, nine brave black Biloxi citizens went onto the beach south of the old Biloxi cemetery to start the first wade-in and the first public civil rights demonstration in Mississippi history. A police officer driving along U.S. 90 saw them and yelled, "You know you can't swim here. Come on down here. We're going to put you under arrest."

WHAT WERE THE RISKS?

Dr. Gilbert Mason later reflected about his 1959 wade-in plans: "I knew that up in Indianola racists had burned the home of Dr. Clinton Battle, an acquaintance of mine. The white community put the economic screws on Clinton Battle and forced him to leave the state. Beyond livelihood, those who even appeared to challenge the racial status quo in Mississippi risked their very lives. Shortly after I set up practice in Biloxi, poor Emmett Till, a teenager, was murdered upstate for so-called "flirting" with a white woman. In 1956, Reverend George Lee, my last pastor at St. James Baptist Church in Jackson, got his head blown off for trying to register to vote in Bolivar County. Then, Mack Charles Parker was lynched in Poplarville in 1958."

WHAT WERE THE RESULTS?

Dr. Mason and Murray Saucier were not arrested. However, they went to city hall the next day to ask to see the statute that says the beach is private property allowing discrimination of black citizens. When pressed, Mayor Laz Quave would not or could not provide any written statute and threatened Dr. Mason, "If you go back down there on the beach, we're going to leave you down there."

Dr. Gilbert
Mason Sr.

Gilbert
Mason Jr.

Mr. Murray
Saucier

Adell Lott

Otha Lee
Floyd

Mr. James
Hoze

Jimmie
Hoze

Gloria
Hoze

Jackie
Hoze



1960

BLOODY SUNDAY

WHAT HAPPENED?

On Sunday, April 24, 1960 around 125 people, organized into three groups, went onto the beach at three locations. Hundreds of white ruffians and onlookers, apparently informed of the wade-in plans, poured onto the beach. Witnesses reported that the mob was armed with bricks, baseball bats, pipes, sticks and chains and attacked the unarmed black protesters. There was no protection from law enforcement. Dr. Mason accounted that "dozens of sheriff's deputies on the scene appeared to step back so as to not interfere with the melee on the beach."

WHAT WERE THE RISKS?

The violence that the authorities allowed to be unleashed on the beach continued and intensified throughout the night. Many East Biloxi businesses were shot up, windows smashed, people threatened and beaten. Until the violence subsided several days later Dr. Mason's medical office was firebombed, and two young black men were killed: Bud Strong, whose body with throat cut was left facing the beach in front of Beauvoir; and Malcomb Jackson, a former member of Dr. Mason's boy scout troop, who was beaten to death while in police custody in Pascagoula.

WHAT WERE THE RESULTS?

Medgar Evers, from the NAACP in Jackson came down to Biloxi and before the week's end gathered 72 sworn affidavits which were forwarded to the U.S. Justice Department. On May 17, 1960 the Justice Department filed suit against Harrison County and the City of Biloxi on behalf of the victims. The first court hearing was three weeks later. The Biloxi branch of the NAACP was formed with Dr. Mason as first president. Within a year, with great effort to overcome the racial discrimination built into voter registration, East Biloxi successfully gained a political voice and helped to elect Biloxi Mayor Daniel Guice, who won by a mere 74 votes. Mayor Guice became the first mayor in Biloxi history to appoint qualified black citizens to city boards and commissions and to hire Biloxi's first black police officers.



1963

CHANGING POLICIES

WHAT HAPPENED?

On June 23, 1963 approximately 75 demonstrators including two white ministers from Back Bay Mission walked onto the beach at the foot of Gill Avenue. The wade-in group carried black flags which they placed in rows in the sand to honor Medgar Evers who had been killed eleven days earlier. Over 2000 white counter protestors looked on, but unlike the 1960 wade-in, the Biloxi police and sheriff deputies were organized to protect the demonstrators with Mayor Guice himself standing by to direct police activity.

WHAT WERE THE RISKS?

Judge Sidney Mize repeatedly delayed the trial brought by the Justice Department so the Biloxi NAACP, stating that "justice delayed is justice denied," planned another wade-in to get arrested to challenge the private property assumption of the beach. Five days before the planned wade-in date Medgar Evers was murdered in the driveway of his house in Jackson. The day before Medgar Evers' assassination a bag was hung on Dr. Mason's fence containing a dead cat, communicating a threat to his life as well.

WHAT WERE THE RESULTS?

After forty minutes on the beach, a property owner across Highway 90 complained and as the protesters had hoped a police officer announced with a bull horn, "You are under arrest for trespassing." The police officers formed lines on either side of the group and marched them to a waiting moving van. The trespassing charge with the Biloxi City court was appealed to Harrison County court, then to the circuit court and to the Mississippi Supreme Court. Meanwhile, the Justice Department suit was eventually settled on August 15, 1968 based on a ruling that land required when the beach was constructed back in 1948 was provided to assure "perpetual public ownership of the beach and its administration for public use only." Two years later the U.S. Supreme Court finally reversed the trespassing convictions from the 1963 wade-in. The result: the twenty-six-mile Mississippi Gulf Coast beach we all enjoy was made freely open to every citizen due to the hard-won victory of the wade-in heroes.



B I L O X I B E A C H W A D E - I N T I M E L I N E

1954

May 17, 1954: Brown v. Board of Education U.S. Supreme Court ruling declaring separate black and white public schools to be unconstitutional.

Bringing about change requires determination at any time. Consider the added challenge when the very system you have to work with is set against you. The Biloxi wade-ins mark the beginning of the civil rights movement in Mississippi. The series of wade-ins and lawsuits set in motion challenges to the state's entrenched segregationist laws. Courageous men and women, many teenagers at the time, risked life, limb and livelihood to claim the rights and benefits guaranteed by the United States constitution. The moving force was Dr. Gilbert Mason, a black physician who came back to his native Mississippi to serve and who became the founding president of the Biloxi branch of the NAACP. We hope the images and words here will encourage you to learn more about the events that shaped today's Biloxi. Dr. Mason's own account with the skillful writing help of James Patterson Smith is given in the book, "Beaches, Blood and Ballots." We recommend you learn more and especially consider how the idealism, intelligence and perseverance of Biloxi's past leaders are still needed today to continue to bring about changes in our time.

1955

Summer 1955: Gilbert Sr., Natalie and one-year-old Gilbert Jr. moved to Biloxi.

"Biloxi was just like any other Mississippi town, its schools were segregated and unimproved, ... everywhere there were separate but unequal white and colored waiting rooms, restaurants, and drinking fountains. ... The beachfront hotels, restaurants, and tourist entertainments were "white only." And a beautiful twenty-six mile long white sand beach was strictly forbidden territory for blacks, except for a few dozen yards in front of the Gulfport Veterans Hospital."



Lighthouse

1960 wade-in: Dr. Mason alone

1957

1958

"If you go back down there we're going to arrest you. That's all there is to it." Biloxi Mayor Laz Quave



"When the police wouldn't let me go onto the beach freely by day, I had gone secretly to the beach at night to pray. In the darkness, on that beach, I had prayed for God to protect us and give us salvation. I had prayed for wisdom, for guidance and for access to gaining freedom. I had prayed for brotherhood and for us to not lose sight that we are all brothers under the fatherhood of God."



"According to Harrison County and the city of Biloxi, my little son could not legally swim in the warm waters of the Gulf of Mexico that lapped the shore just a few blocks from our home."

1959

May 14, 1959: Dr. Mason with his son, two other adults and several youngsters led a wade-in. Police removed the demonstrators with no charges but threatened:

"If you go back down there on the beach, we're going to leave you there."

June 1959: Dr. Mason and Dr. Dunn organized Biloxi Civic League and Harrison County Community Civic Action Committee.

September 1959: Mason meetings. October 1959: Petition to Harrison County Board of Supervisors.

April 17, 1960: "Operation Surf" Disappointing turnout; Dr. Dunn and his family with Wilson Evans in Gulfport; Dr. Mason alone in Biloxi. But as hoped Dr. Mason was arrested and charged as a "repeat offender."

April 18, 1960: Dr. Mason tried in Biloxi Municipal Court.

James Black and Ethel Rainey asked for help organizing a new protest.

1960

April 24, 1960: Demonstrations on beach trigger police-sponsored white mob attack on demonstrators. April 25 to May 5: Medgar Evers gathers 72 affidavits on the beatings, which were forwarded to the U.S. Justice Department.

May 17, 1960: Justice Department files suit against Harrison County and Biloxi on behalf of victims. June 6, 1960: First hearing in federal court before Judge Sidney Mize. June 10, 1960: First of over 200 delay motions:



1961

May 16, 1961: Daniel Guice defeats Laz Quave in close runoff, reflecting political power of newly registered black voters.

1962

"Justice too long delayed is justice denied." Dr. Mason



1963

"If we are to receive a hearing, let's receive it because we have done something, not because we have done nothing." Medgar Evers

June 12, 1963: Medgar Evers Assassinated.

June 23, 1963: Wade-in protest to challenge private beach property assumptions. 71 people arrested. Over 2000 white residents held counter protest.



1964

August 31, 1964: Desegregated classes opened in Biloxi.

July 2, 1964: Civil Rights Act

1965

February 12, 1965: Trial phase ends. Judge Mize delays ruling. April 26, 1965: Judge Sidney Mize dies.

December 14, 1964: After more than 200 delay motions the beach case comes before Judge Mize.



"We did believe in a transcendent and redemptive purpose in our work. We believed that our unjustified suffering could awaken slumbering moral sensitivities in the majority white community that surrounded us."

1966

"I had prayed the prayer of Job; 'Oh that thou wouldst bless me and enlarge my border, and that thy hand might be with me.'" from 1 Chronicles 4:10.



"Nothing comes without a struggle. Some struggles are physical. Some struggles are moral. Some struggles are legal and political. Every struggle is a spiritual struggle, a test of faith and will."

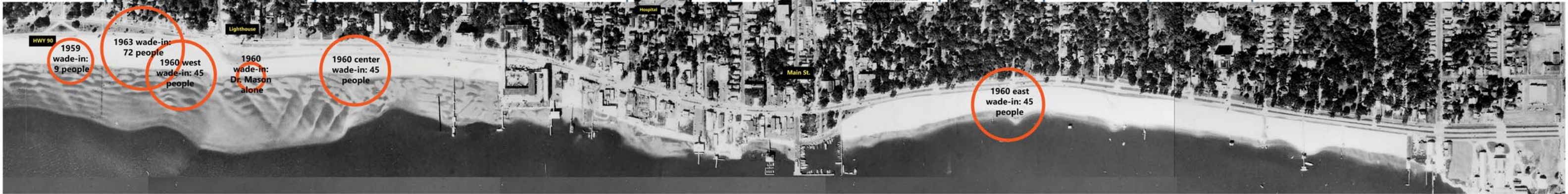
1967

March 8, 1967 Judge Harold Cox ruled against the plaintiffs upholding segregationist beach practice. Justice Department files immediate appeal to Fifth Circuit Court.



1968

August 15, 1968: Fifth Circuit Court reverses Judge Cox ruling by Judge J. P. Coleman. The beach was opened to ALL members of the public.



A COMMUNITY EFFORT

WHAT CAN YOU DO?

We enjoy the beach today because of the courageous actions of the wade-in protesters. But there is still work to be done.

WHERE DO YOU SEE INJUSTICE TODAY?

We invite you to answer this question. Please text your response to **(202) 410-4121**. Responses will be compiled and shared as part of an interactive art exhibit. For brevity, please limit your response to three words.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

This temporary beach exhibit was made possible from a Knight Cities Challenge Award from the Knight Foundation to Mississippi State University's Gulf Coast Community Design Studio. The platform and changeable furniture will be used for future beach gatherings and exhibits to tell the important story of Biloxi's Civil Rights history. The Gulf Coast Community Design Studio is working in partnership with the City of Biloxi, The Biloxi Branch of the NAACP, the East Biloxi Community Collaborative, Back Bay Mission and the Mississippi Center for Justice to promote the Civil Rights lessons that we should all learn from the courageous acts of those that came before us. We thank Dr. Gilbert Mason Jr. for his work to continue the legacy of his father. We also thank Dr. James Patterson Smith, who worked with Dr. Gilbert R. Mason Sr. to write the book "Beaches, Blood and Ballots," from which the content of this exhibit was drawn. Lastly, we thank Mr. Clemon Jimerson, one of the 1960 wade-in participants who continues to work to watch over, acknowledge and honor the other wade-in participants.