

Policeman charged in rights murder, 42 years on

Wed May 9, 2007 8:24PM EDT

By Verna Gates

BIRMINGHAM, Alabama (Reuters) - A white Alabama police officer was charged on Wednesday with the murder of a black man during a civil rights protest 42 years ago, a killing that helped lead to the 1965 U.S. Voting Rights Act.

A grand jury indicted James Bonard Fowler, a retired Alabama state trooper, for the murder of Jimmie Lee Jackson, whose death triggered a march that led to the infamous "Bloody Sunday" beatings of civil rights protesters in Selma, Alabama.

Now 74, Fowler faces 10 years to life in prison if convicted, district attorney Michael Jackson said.

"I am a product of the Voting Rights Act. I wouldn't be elected without it. It is ironic that I will be prosecuting this case," said Jackson, the only African-American district attorney elected in Alabama.

The indictment was the latest in a series of prosecutions in cold cases from the civil rights era in southern states. The FBI said in February it was reviewing nearly 100 unsolved suspected murders from more than 40 years ago.

The Voting Rights Act of 1965 transformed the U.S. political landscape by removing poll taxes, literacy tests and other barriers used to bar blacks and poor people from voting.

Jackson was killed during a demonstration on February 18, 1965, in Marion, Alabama, where 500 people gathered to march to the Perry County jail to protest the incarceration of Rev. James Orange.

When they approached the jail, they met a wall of police officers. The street lights went out, billy clubs emerged and the crowd was beaten back.

Protesters filled nearby Mack's Cafe. Troopers followed, striking protesters and customers alike.

According to witness reports, Jimmie Lee Jackson was shot when he tried to rescue his grandfather, who was hit with a billy club.

Jackson's death eight days later triggered a march of black activists from Selma. On the Edmund Pettus Bridge, lawmen attacked the demonstrators with clubs, tear gas and whips. Images of the attack sparked support for the civil rights movement and the Rev. Martin Luther King Jr. led a subsequent march from Selma to Montgomery.

In a 2005 interview with the Anniston Star newspaper, Fowler said rocks and bottles were being tossed at the cafe. He said he felt his gun being pulled from its holster and he shot the man tugging it out, Jimmie Lee Jackson, in self-defense.

"The evidence will be clear he was acting in defense of himself and other troopers," said George Beck, Fowler's attorney.

Eyewitness Elijah Rollins said the atmosphere in the cafe was peaceful until the troopers arrived. Rollins owns Lee and Rollins Funeral Home, which sits atop the site of Mack's Cafe.

"It was peaceful when the demonstrators were there, before the troopers arrived," Rollins said.

In another cold case, James Seale, a former sheriff's deputy and reputed member of the Ku Klux Klan, was arrested in January in connection with the murder of two black teenagers abducted and killed in Mississippi in 1964.

In 2005, a Mississippi jury convicted Edgar Ray Killen for his role in the Klan's 1964 killings of voter registration workers James Chaney, Andrew Goodman and Michael Schwerner. He was given a 60-year sentence.

© Reuters 2006. All rights reserved. Republication or redistribution of Reuters content, including by caching, framing or similar means, is expressly prohibited without the prior written consent of Reuters. Reuters and the Reuters sphere logo are registered trademarks and trademarks of the Reuters group of companies around the world.

Reuters journalists are subject to the Reuters Editorial Handbook which requires fair presentation and disclosure of relevant interests.