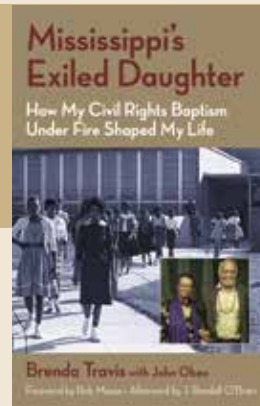


Mississippi's Exiled Daughter

How My Civil Rights Baptism Under Fire Shaped My Life

By Brenda Travis with John Obee, published by NewSouth Books (2018), softcover, 143 pages, \$21.95, www.newsouthbooks.com



Reviewed by Antoinette Raheem

The subtitle of *Mississippi's Exiled Daughter* might lead one to erroneously believe the book is only about the events of one woman's life. The book *is* about the civil rights work, dedication, and sacrifices of a remarkable young African-American woman—actually only a girl at the time of most of the book—in the Deep South in the 1950s and '60s. Yet the book compellingly tells a greater story about how a series of defining moments can lead to a succession of small acts that sustain a world-changing movement. The book is also an intriguing testimony to how fighting the war against injustice requires not only leadership from great generals, but also small actions by courageous foot soldiers. Brenda Travis is one such foot soldier.

The book was written by Travis, the main character, and Michigan lawyer John Obee. Together, they tell the true story of a young African-American high schooler who, starting in Mississippi in 1961, made great personal sacrifices to help wage the war for racial equality in America. When one considers that it is rare to see teenagers—then or now—with the courage or concern to sacrifice at all, the book leads the reader to wonder what made Travis so unique, so brave, so willing to put herself in the path of certain danger. As the book unfolds, it discloses how, in large part, Travis was motivated by a series of defining moments—in the larger society, in her community, and in her own family—and maybe by more.

Mississippi's Exiled Daughter skillfully sets the stage for how Travis's life began in

1945. She grew up in McComb, Mississippi, in a two-bedroom house that over the course of her youth held as many as 20 people at a time, including her mother, siblings, and sometimes aunts and cousins (p 8). Since her mother was her family's sole supporter, the children were sent out to find work as early as age 10 to ease the family's strained financial position (p 10). Yet the authors note that Travis's family was not alone in its poverty and that "the vast majority [of blacks] in McComb were very much like [her] family—poor and dependent upon whites for their livelihood." (p 7) The book also aptly conveys how the education of blacks during that time was not designed to teach youngsters to explore the unknown and engage in creative thinking, but was primarily intended to indoctrinate young African Americans with discipline, for fear that stepping out of line could result in death (p 14). Yet as the book reveals, if fear was the goal of her education, Travis was a poor student.

The authors take the reader back even further than Travis's childhood in providing glimpses into the building blocks that were the impetus for this remarkable woman's later undertakings. For example, the book relates how Travis's great-grandmother told her daughter (Brenda's grandmother) about the day she watched her slave mother taken from her by force. To the slave owner, it was no doubt an unremarkable and necessary business transaction of passing sold property to the new owner. To Travis's great-grandmother, a slave herself at the time, it was the ripping of a beloved family mem-

ber from a young girl, leaving the child scared, puzzled, and alone (pp 4–5). In describing how Travis's grandmother passed this story through the generations, the book subtly conveys how this cruel, unfathomable, but very personal story left an indelible mark on Travis.

Starting closer to the time of Travis's own life, the book also reveals the fate of her sharecropper father, gingerly shedding light on the series of events that were a catalyst for Travis's personal sacrifices. When Travis's mother was pregnant with her, she worked beside her husband on a sharecropping farm. One day, the property owner approached Travis's father and asked him why his wife was not working in the field. Mr. Travis explained that his wife was in the throes of labor, but the farmer insisted that she return to work immediately. When Travis's father had the audacity to protest forcing his wife to work while in labor, the farmer threatened to kill him—something he could no doubt do with impunity to a black man in the Jim Crow era.

Under this threat of death, Mr. Travis fled with his wife and newborn daughter. Once he got them to safety, he left the state to avoid vigilante "justice" at the hands of his former boss. Consequently, Brenda saw very little of her father growing up (pp 5–6). The book poignantly describes how racism once again led to ripping apart a loving family. In doing so, the authors skillfully provide yet another peek into the defining events that contributed to Travis's willingness to take up the mantle of the civil rights movement at an early age.

Coming closer to the time Travis stepped into her own civil rights activism, *Mississippi's Exiled Daughter* provides impassioned insight into how news of the beating and lynching of young Emmett Till impacted Brenda's young life. Till was an African-American boy, just a few years older than Brenda, who was murdered by angry whites because he had allegedly whistled at a white girl in the South (p 16). At age 10, Brenda saw a magazine with pictures of Till's mutilated body that shocked the nation.

"I had never been an angry person," Travis said. "But the raw brutality of Emmett Till's murder unleashed something in me.... I had no idea how I was going to accomplish it, but I knew that I would find a way to do something meaningful with my life to better the world of Mississippi that we had to endure." (pp 17–18)

A short time later, another defining moment occurred when Travis's teenage brother, James, was forcibly taken from their home by a white mob that erroneously believed he had committed an act. Although James was released hours later (p 18), the book clearly conveys how the incident brought home to Travis the fragility of black lives in the South.

Against the backdrop of these experiences, the authors transition seamlessly to describing how Travis began her own foray into the battle against racism in the Jim Crow South. As the book recounts, Travis joined her county's NAACP chapter at age 16 and presided over its first Youth Club (p 20). One of the first NAACP projects Travis engaged in was distributing flyers inviting black community members to voter registration classes (p 26). Although registering to vote may seem like a routine act today, African-American voters in the 1960s South faced a multitude of threats and barriers. Some would-be registrants and supporters were arrested for "interfering with an officer," intimidated by police while waiting to register, or denied entrance to the voter registration office (pp 18–19). Thus, Travis's job of convincing her African-American neighbors to take on these risks to register to vote was no small task. Yet, she persevered.

Building to the heart of the book, the authors intricately describe how, shortly af-

ter joining the NAACP, 16-year-old Travis agreed to put herself on the front lines of "direct action" activism. Without revealing too much detail, suffice it to say that the bold acts of this young foot soldier included two protests that led to Travis twice being jailed (pp 38, 54). But incarceration was only the start of her trials, as it led to her exile from Mississippi (p 64), subsequent sexual abuse (pp 69–70), and living like a nomad, roaming from home to home as a teenager, where those sympathetic to the civil rights movement opened their doors to her (pp 76–85). Perhaps the most tragic irony the book reveals is that Travis, moved to action in large part by the desire to redress the discrimination that had torn her great-grandmother and father away from their loved ones, was torn away from her own family in the course of her battle against discrimination. Finally, readers are walked through Travis's adult life. In doing so, the authors adeptly reveal that, although still affected by the courageous acts of her youth, Travis is ultimately a victor and not a victim.

Mississippi's Exiled Daughter is written simply and humbly. Travis presents herself not as a hero, but rather as a woman moved by her experiences to do as much as she could to right a wrongful system. While the book explains that this foot soldier in the civil rights movement paid (and continues) to pay an enormous price for her courage, it masterfully inspires readers to answer their own calls to action.

I had the privilege of meeting Brenda Travis in 2018 and discovered what motivated her to make the sacrifices she did. The defining events of her life certainly were part of the answer, yet many others had had similar experiences or worse. However, when one sees the vibrant, positive, energetic woman Travis is now as a seasoned citizen, it is not hard to understand that the essential catalysts for her sacrifices were her personal courage and indelible strength. One might expect her struggles to have drained Travis of any zest for living, but nothing could be further from the truth. Now in her seventies, Travis travels the country reminding those who come to hear her speak of the challenges she and many others faced while fighting racism.

With nothing more than her own life story and survival, she stands as a motivator to others to address similar challenges today.

With *Mississippi's Exiled Daughter*, Travis and Obee give readers a unique and invaluable perspective of a dark, yet hopeful, time in our nation's history. I highly recommend this compelling story of one foot soldier's impact on history. ■

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MONEY JUDGMENT INTEREST RATE

MCL 600.6013 governs how to calculate the interest on a money judgment in a Michigan state court. Interest is calculated at six-month intervals in January and July of each year, from when the complaint was filed, and is compounded annually.

For a complaint filed after December 31, 1986, the rate as of January 1, 2019 is 3.848 percent. This rate includes the statutory 1 percent.

But a different rule applies for a complaint filed after June 30, 2002 that is based on a written instrument with its own specified interest rate. The rate is the lesser of:

- (1) 13 percent a year, compounded annually; or
- (2) the specified rate, if it is fixed—or if it is variable, the variable rate when the complaint was filed if that rate was legal.

For past rates, see <http://courts.mi.gov/Administration/SCAO/Resources/Documents/other/interest.pdf>.

As the application of MCL 600.6013 varies depending on the circumstances, you should review the statute carefully.