

Janie Brewer and the Ambush in Tallahatchie County

Janie Brewer is one of the many unsung heroines of the Civil Rights Era. Mrs. Brewer lived in the community of Swan Lake located in Tallahatchie County, Mississippi where the lynching of Emmet Till took place. She was the 89-year-old matriarch of the Brewer family which owned a large piece of land where she and several of her children and grandchildren lived and operated a farm. She was a big supporter of Black voter registration and hosted several members of SNCC and COFO who had come to Mississippi to do just that during the Freedom Summer of 1964. Additionally, Mrs. Brewer like many other Black Mississippians was true believer in the right of armed self-defense. To get an idea of the type person she was one only has to look at an exchange between her and a young SNCC activist that was staying in her home:

Mrs. Brewer asked me what did SNCC mean and I told her the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee. And she stopped me. [She said] "You said nonviolent. If somebody come at you, you ain't gonna do nothing."...She pulled up a big ole rifle....She kept a big rifle behind the chair....[Brewer said,] "Shit, we ain't nonviolent."...Since I was living with them [the Brewers], I had to be what the family was.

On August 5, 1964 a few of Mrs. Brewer's sons attempted to register to vote but were unsuccessful as they were blocked and harassed by white mobs. For several days the Brewers and other Blacks assisting the voter registration campaign were harassed by the county sheriff and white mobs brandishing guns. SNCC and COFO activists tried to caravan the residents to a neighboring town to register but were met with a similar reception. The tension of the situation came to a head on the evening of August 11, 1964 when activists got word that a white mob led by the sheriff was going to attack the Brewer family farm. Janie Brewer was expecting an attack on her and her family and already had a plan to deal with the nightriders. There was only one road approaching the farm so she instructed her children, grandchildren, guests, and town volunteers to arm themselves and hide in the cotton fields and shrubs alongside the road in ambush positions. Janie Brewer and a couple of activists were making Molotov cocktails in the kitchen when the mob arrived. Mrs. Brewer intended on letting the mob get close to the house before she and her crew would attack with gunfire and firebombs. Just before the mob got to the designated ambush position one of the town volunteers in the field turned on a large spotlight, shined it on the approaching convoy, and fired into the air. Mrs. Brewer came out of the house armed and ready to throw a Molotov cocktail at the intruders. The resident that fired the shot stood up and approached the sheriff telling him and his posse that they needed to leave or else there would be consequences. The sheriff, noticing all of the armed Black people surrounding the

road quickly ordered the mob back into their cars and beat a hasty retreat. Two days later a county construction crew demolished the road leading to the Brewer farm in retaliation for their defiance and from that point on there was never an attack on the Brewer farm ever again.

(All quotes and historical information comes from *We Will Shoot Back: Armed Resistance in the Mississippi Freedom Movement* by Dr. Akinyele Umoja)