



IN PROTEST: (Above) Hundreds of protestors rally against the verdict issued in the Willie Jerome Manning trial as they marched to the Oktibbeha County Courthouse.

Saturday's march draws hundreds

By Bryant Adkins, *Reflector Assistant News Editor*

"It was a travesty of justice,"

Oktibbeha County NAACP Vice President Douglas Conner said at Saturday's march, sponsored by the Oktibbeha County NAACP. The march was held to protest the conviction of Willie Jerome Manning.

Supporters of Manning sang "We Shall Overcome" as they marched from the Masonic Lodge on North Washington Street to the Oktibbeha County Courthouse. The group held a rally at the Courthouse and posted a banner which said "Innocent Until Proven Guilty" on the columns of the building.

Some of the notables who spoke included Rev. O. C. Brand, president of the Oktibbeha County Ministers Alliance, and civil rights leader Morris Kinsey as well as several NAACP county presidents.

"I think the people got the message well," Dorothy Bishop, president of the Oktibbeha County NAACP said. "Everybody is saying that [the conviction] really isn't

true, and that's what really hurts me!"

Reports are sketchy on the attendance of the march. Police Chief Larry Sisk said about 200 people participated, while Conner said about 500 people participated. Bishop said about 750 were present.

Police Chief Larry Sisk said the march was "very peaceful, very cooperative and very law-abiding."

"Everything we asked them to do they did," Sisk added.

Manning was convicted of the Dec. 11, 1992, murders of Tiffany Miller, 21, of Madison and Jon Stephen Steckler, 19, of Natchez. Manning has been sentenced to die by lethal injection on Dec. 16, 1994.

Conner explained that the group believes racism was involved in this case for several reasons. There was a murder and a rape Labor Day of 1990. The killer was described by a witness as a white male with dirty blond hair. He was never found and never convicted, Conner said.

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Conner also pointed out that Manning was charged four months after the murders of Miller and Steckler and was chosen from a list of 22 black suspects the police believed capable of the crime. No white suspects were on the list, he said.

No DNA testing was done on the white skin found under Tiffany Miller's fingernails, and no physical evidence was brought forth in the case, he added.

Conner said he believed the evidence to be "circumstantial, shaky, confusing, unbelievable and poorly rehearsed."

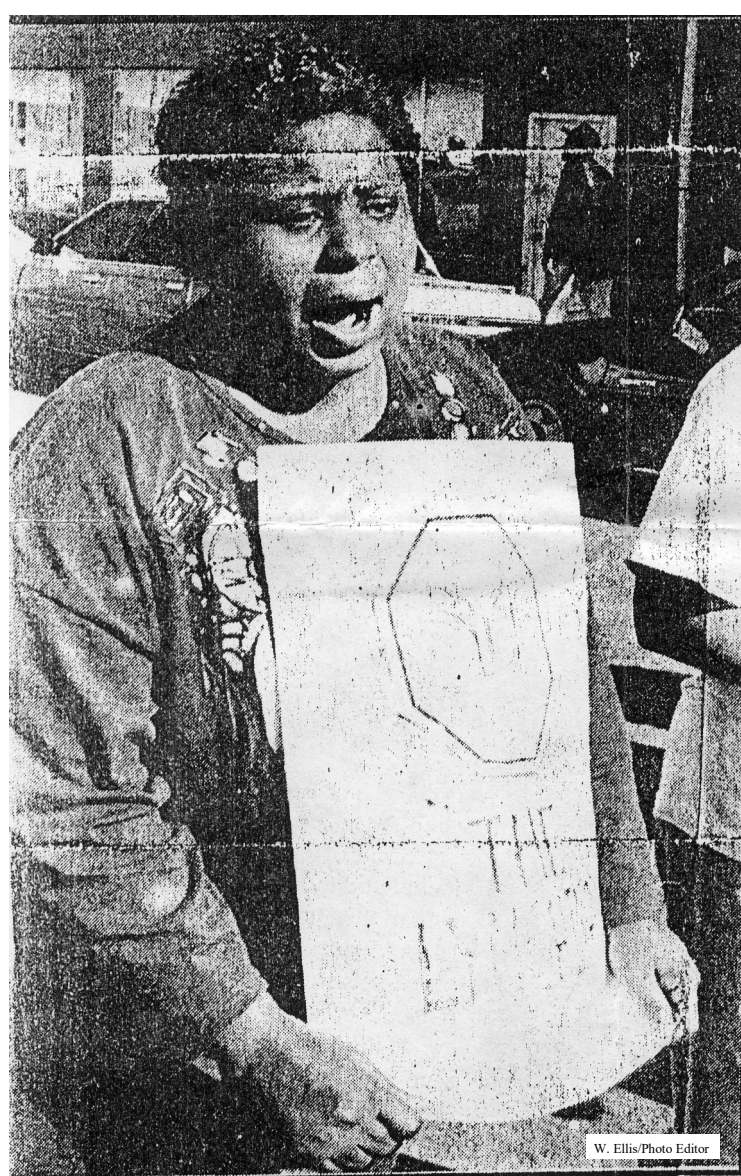
"Circuit Judge Lee Howard said the prosecution's job was to prove he was guilty beyond a reasonable doubt. I submit there was plenty of reasonable doubt," Conner said.

"We weren't so much concerned protesting the conviction of a killer, but it was protesting the method it was done in. We don't think the right person was convicted. We still think the killer is at large," Conner added.

Floyd Newton, president of the MSU chapter of the NAACP, said, "Our chapter, the MSU chapter, did not plan or participate in the march as a chapter. It was done solely by the Oktibbeha County chapter of the NAACP.

"This is not to say the MSU chapter and the Oktibbeha County chapter are divided in the matter; it is just that our chapter has chosen not to take a side.

"Concerning the conviction, it is not the duty of my chapter to decide whether he was innocent or guilty. That was left up to the court, and the court gave its ruling. I cannot give a fair opinion of whether or not it was a fair ruling, because I did not hear all the testimony or see all the evidence."



IN PROTEST: (Above) Ruth Ann Manning shows grief as she marches in protest of her son's Nov. 7 conviction for the murder of two Mississippi State University students.

The sign that Willie's mother is holding appears to state, "STOP THE LYNCHING".