

With the possible exception of Isaiah Montgomery, Theodore Roosevelt Mason (T.R.M.) Howard had probably the greatest impact on Mound Bayou's history. He was also one of the great unsung civil rights leader of the twentieth century. Few individuals contributed more significantly to the struggle against Jim Crow and disfranchisement than T.R.M. Howard. Without Dr. Howard we would probably never heard of Medgar Evers and Fannie Lou Hamer and quite possible have never heard of Rosa Parks. Howard loomed large in such major black newspapers as The Chicago Defender, The Pittsburgh Courier, and The Memphis World.

Four years before the Montgomery Bus Boycott, he founded a mass nonviolent movement in the Mississippi Delta. From 1952 to 1955, he organized annual civil rights rallies in Mound Bayou that sometimes attracted crowds of ten thousand, led a successful statewide boycott, and publicly faced down a segregationist governor. He not only hired Medgar Evers for his first job out of college but was instrumental in introducing him to the civil rights movement. So scathing was his criticism of the FBI's failure to protect civil rights that J. Edgar Hoover took the rare step of denouncing Howard in an open letter. Howard threw himself into the search for evidence to help solve the murder of Emmett Till, and gave over his home to serve as a refuge for reporters and witnesses during the trial.

A wealthy entrepreneur, accomplished surgeon, and fraternal society leader, Howard had a zest for life. He stood out among blacks and whites in the Delta as he sped down the highway in his Cadillac which was always the latest model. The center of attention in any social setting, Howard was tall, affable, immaculate, and stylishly dressed. Howard's love of having a good time was infectious and he incorporated it into his civil rights organizing. Crowds did not just flock to the annual rallies of the Regional Council of Negro Leadership, a grassroots civil rights and self-help organization he founded in 1951, to hear speakers such as Thurgood Marshall and Rep. Charles Diggs of Michigan. They also came to see such entertainers as Mahalia Jackson, compete in sporting events, and sample home-made barbecue.

These activities brought Howard national recognition and praise. Paul Robeson, the singer and actor, lauded him as “an energetic and resourceful leader,” and The California Eagle dubbed him the “most hated, and the best loved, man in Mississippi.” In 1956, The Chicago Defender gave Howard the top spot on its annual honor roll for “arousing the nation to the criminal conspiracy of white supremacists in the state of Mississippi.” Martin Luther King, Jr. was not even on the list. Simeon Booker of Jet lionized Howard as an “outspoken, fearless, and cunning....sectional hero” who had become “part of the Delta’s folklore.”

Prominent black leaders recognized Howard as a peer and friend. Roy Wilkins of the NAACP thought so highly of his rhetorical skills that he underwrote a national speaking tour in the months after the Till murder. “People call Martin Luther King Jr. the Negro orator of the century,” Charles Evers writes. “T.R.M. Howard was as good, or better, and I heard them both in their prime.” Howard’s speeches also impressed Mamie Till-Mobley, the mother of Emmett Till. She stayed in Howard’s home during the trial of her son’s accused killers. “The man was dynamic,” she recalls. “I just thought he was the greatest in the world.” Similarly, A. Philip Randolph, the head of the International Brotherhood of Sleeping Car Porters, saluted Howard’s fight against the “racialism and the tribalism of those who would strike down the Constitution.”

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Unlike many of his better known peers, Howard thrived as a doctor and entrepreneur before he emerged as a civil rights leader. In 1942, he came to Mississippi to become chief surgeon at the Taborian Hospital in the all-black town of Mound Bayou. The International Order of Twelve Knights and Daughters of Tabor, a fraternal organization of nearly fifty thousand members in Mississippi, used the hospital to give low cost medical care to thousands of poor people. Within five years, Howard had founded various business and community enterprises including a home construction firm, credit union, insurance company, restaurant with a beer garden, and a thousand acre farm where he raised cattle, quail, hunting dogs, and cotton. He built a small zoo and park as well as the first swimming pool for blacks in Mississippi.

Howard left a deep imprint on black social and cultural life in the Delta. Myrlie Evers, who, like her husband Medgar, worked for Howard's insurance company, came closest to capturing the essence of the man: "One look told you that he was a leader: kind, affluent, and intelligent, that rare Negro in Mississippi who had somehow beaten the system." Through his Regional Council of Negro Leadership, Howard championed a message of self-help, mutual aid, thrift, and equal political rights. His business connections came in handy after the Supreme Court's 1954 Brown decision. When the segregationist white Citizens Councils imposed a "credit freeze" against civil rights activists, Howard found creative ways to fight back. At his suggestion, the NAACP organized a national campaign to urge black voluntary associations and businesses to deposit their money in the Tri-State Bank of Memphis. Tri-State, in turn, made this money available to blacks who were victims of the credit squeeze.

Not surprisingly, Howard became a favorite villain of segregationists. The Jackson Daily News, the main newspaper in the state, considered him "public enemy number 1" and a "big mouthed Negro racial agitator." Howard had a small arsenal in his home, including a Thompson submachine gun, and armed guards around-the-clock. More than once, Howard ran afoul of Mississippi's discriminatory gun control laws which denied permits to blacks who wanted to carry concealed weapons.

During this period, Howard reached the height of his national influence, both professionally and in civil rights. In 1955, black doctors from around the country elected him as head of the National Medical Association (NMA), the black counterpart to the American Medical Association. He used this position to promote civil rights as well as to expose second class treatment in health care. One of his most important accomplishments of his term as NMA president was the Imhotep National Conference on Hospital Integration. Howard was also chair of the board of directors of the National Negro Business League, a black chamber of commerce founded by Booker T. Washington.

His speeches on the Emmett Till case throughout the country drew thousands and received prominent coverage in the national black press. One of the stops on his speaking tour was at the Dexter Avenue Baptist Church in Montgomery, Alabama on November 27, 1955. His host was Martin Luther King, Jr. Rosa Parks was in the audience. The speech was still headline news in the local black press when she refused to give up her seat on a segregated bus four days later. Parks later explained that she was thinking of Emmett Till, a focal point of Howard's speech, when she made her decision.

In the final months of 1955, Howard sold most of his property and moved permanently in Chicago. He also had a highly visible public dispute with J. Edgar Hoover who he accused of slowness to find the killers of blacks in the South. In early 1956, The Chicago Defender gave Howard the top spot on its annual national honor role. He founded the profitable Howard Medical Center on the South Side and served for one year as president of the National Medical Association, the black counterpart of the AMA. Howard also became medical director of S.B. Fuller Products Company. Fuller was probably the richest black man in the country.

A defining feature of Howard's life was to remake himself, again, again, and yet again. He was a surgeon, entrepreneur, civil rights leader, and community builder. After his move to Chicago, he became a big game hunter and party-giver on a grand scale. He dazzled the black social set by staging elaborate and expensive New Year's Eve parties that featured live bands and the best soul food. The guest list often included his friends,

Jesse Owens, the former Olympic gold medalist, and publisher Robert E. Johnson of *Jet* and *Ebony*. Howard's unapologetic display of wealth and abundant self-confidence inspired many ordinary blacks in Chicago. They appreciated the fact that he was able to cross boundaries that few other black people could. Dick Gregory, then a struggling young comedian, commented that when Howard's car appeared, "everybody waved....it was like Queen Elizabeth driving down the street in London....When Howard walked into a night club, everything stopped. It was like the President walked in." Howard's big game exploits took him on hunting expeditions to Africa, India, and Alaska. All of this added to the mystique of a black man who dared to do the extraordinary.

His career culminated in 1972 when he founded the commodious Friendship Medical Center valued at over \$1 million. Blacks on the South Side went there for a broad range of medical services which included everything from podiatry to emergency care. The Center was the largest privately owned black medical facility in Chicago. The comfortable and attractive environment anticipated the patient friendly health care of later decades. Inside were bubbling fountains, wall posters of Martin Luther King, Jr., Isaac Hayes, and Angela Davis, comfortable waiting rooms, a display of Howard's trophies, and soothing music.

Howard spoke for a civil rights tradition in the South that prevailed before the rise of Martin Luther King, Jr. It was a tradition that relied on local talent and preexisting networks of black businesses and voluntary associations. These early activists bore the brunt of initial white opposition to *Brown v. Board* in 1954. In contrast to many of those who came later, Howard used business success into a launching pad into civil rights. In Mississippi, black entrepreneurs, large and small, were more prominent than the clergy as leaders. Business and professional success gave them a degree of independence from white control and pressure that other blacks did not have. In this respect, groups such as the Regional Council of Negro Leadership, the Knights and Daughters of Tabor, and the National Negro Business League represented the fruition of Booker T. Washington's long-term strategy for black improvement. Washington had depicted business, property

ownership, the professions, and voluntary associations as the necessary foundation on which to build a movement for political rights.

Howard's life also brings to the surface an older philosophy of civil rights that emphasized the importance of armed self-defense. While he advocated a general stance of non-violence, he, along with such allies as Medgar Evers, always carried guns "just in case." As one historian put it, these activists combined a strategy of "God, Guns and Gandhi." Howard anticipated the later campaigns of Robert F. Williams, the head of a NAACP chapter in Monroe, North Carolina who applied for a NRA charter to form a civil rights-oriented gun club, and the Deacons of Defense in Louisiana which deployed armed patrols to protect activists during the 1960s.

While historians have properly acknowledged the contributions of clergymen and grass-roots activists such as Martin Luther King, Jr., Fred Shuttlesworth, Fannie Lou Hamer, and Ella Baker, they have too often neglected those made by entrepreneurs and black professionals. In Mississippi, during the 1950s, and probably other states, they provided the funds and formed the core leadership that kept this movement alive. The story of T.R.M Howard brings to the forefront the heroic contributions of these men and women to black economic improvement and to the struggle for civil rights.