When the Reporter Becomes the Story: 
Covering the KKK-Communist Confrontation 
In Greensboro, North Carolina—November 3, 1979

by

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Winston Cavin was a 26-year-old reporter, just four years out of the University of North Carolina-Chapel Hill’s journalism school. He was headed to the southeast section of Greensboro, North Carolina, on his Saturday rotation as a reporter for the Greensboro Daily News.

It was chilly outside. He was wrapped in an olive green Army surplus jacket.

It was November 3, 1979.

Cavin had three events to cover that day. The first was a Ku Klux Klan protest rally at Morningside Homes, a housing project.

“I wanted to be [at the march] for an hour or so and bang out a story on it,” Cavin said in an interview thirteen years later.

As he arrived, he came upon a young man playing acoustic guitar and singing an anti-Ku Klux Klan song. Beside him, a group of black children were beating an effigy of a Klansman, but they probably didn’t realize what the political significance of their actions was, Cavin said.

A few feet away, about 30 members of the Workers Viewpoint Organization had gathered to stage this pre-planned, well-publicized rally they had organized.

A number of television stations were there, also, preparing to broadcast the protest live, Cavin said.

“Saturdays are slow news days,” Cavin said. “They would send crews out to anything live on a Saturday that was visual.”

It was shortly after 11 a.m., Cavin recalls, when he realized there would be trouble.

“I was standing on the curb and heard somebody say ‘Klan,’” Cavin said.

He looked down the street and saw about four small pickup trucks and an old, banged-up Ford Falcon sedan approaching. Then he saw a couple of protestors hit the lead car of the caravan with the two-by-four wood planks they used to hold up their picket signs. Another young black man kicked the lower side of the car.

“The crowd surged around the cars, pounding the vehicles with fists and sticks.”

“I thought, ‘This doesn’t look good,’ ” Cavin said. “They drove by and I could see that they had guns in their laps,” Cavin said. “They were old fashioned pistols, like out of Westerns.”
His instinct told him to run.

“I ran right between these Klan cars,” he said. He hurried across the street and crouched behind the trunk of an old brown Ford. Then, BANG.14

BANG. BANG. BANG.

“Before it could get organized, several carloads of men carrying pistols, rifles and shotguns drove through the narrow street and began shooting into the crowd after the would-be marchers attacked their cars with sticks.”15

Some of the WVO members were armed with small pistols, but they were no match for the semiautomatic AR15s the KKK was using, Cavin said.16

“People shouting. ‘Here we are niggers!’ ‘Come and get us.’ ‘Get them!’ ‘Kill them!’” Cavin later wrote in a first-person account of the event. “It was impossible to assess who was saying what, who was threatening whom. Profanity was everywhere.”17

From behind the old Ford, Cavin had a slightly obscured view. But the image of Klansman and shooter Jack Fowler left an indelible mark on his memory.18

“Fowler gets out of his car. The trunk comes open, and he starts getting out these rifles,” Cavin said, describing semiautomatic weapons. “It happened so fast… He casually starts shooting people… He has a cigarette dangling from his mouth… They essentially just mowed them down.”19

Cavin also remembers Klansman Jerry Paul Smith running up the sidewalk to a man lying on the cement. The man was wounded and struggling for breath. Smith shot the man, a WVO protestor, several times at point-blank range and then ran away.20

The shots continued for about 88 seconds, Cavin said.21 They were going in every direction. “Bullets bounced off the entrance to the Doris Alford Recreation Center and ricocheted off trees,” Cavin wrote that day.22

They rebounded off the coin-operated laundry behind Cavin’s makeshift Ford fortress. Suddenly, he realized he was not alone. Crouching beside him was WVO leader Nelson Johnson, a
well-known activist and agitator. Cavin was surely a dead man, he said. Johnson was a target of the KKK gunmen. They seemed to be going after the leaders in the WVO, Cavin said. But the gunmen didn’t see Johnson’s hiding place.

The shooting stopped. The KKK caravan left.

There were bodies on the grass, street and sidewalk.

Cavin wandered around and saw people taking their last breaths. He furiously scribbled notes on the incident.

Lying on the ground was James M. Waller. His throat was gurgling as he was struggling to breathe. Waller’s wife, Signe, was holding his head in her lap and screaming hysterically, repeating the political dogma of the WVO, blaming the police and the government for the violence.

“Almost before the echoes of the gunfire had ceased, members of the Workers Viewpoint Organization were screaming that the police had ‘done this,’” Cavin wrote.

“I thought, ‘Are they so addicted to this dogma? Are they so brainwashed?’” Cavin said. But in retrospect, Cavin said, the communist party members were probably in shock and “on autopilot,” the same way he couldn’t do anything after the shooting but write notes in his reporter’s notebook.

“Sally Bermanzohn, whose husband was seriously wounded, accused the police of knowing in advance that Klansmen planned an ambush. ‘What we want to do is get rid of this system, the rule of these big monopolies. It’s a system that murders people in the street,’ she said in rhetoric repeated by other members of the Communist groups.”

Within four minutes, the police arrived at the scene, Cavin said. Their immediate evaluation was that four were dead and at least 10 were wounded.

Just down the street, police stopped the KKK caravan and arrested 14 assailants, charging them with four counts of first-degree murder. Twelve of those arrested presented themselves as Klansmen.

*Greensboro Record* staff writer Jim Schlosser remembers the day clearly, too. He arrived on
the scene about 2 p.m. and attended a press conference the WVO held on Aycock Street, just blocks from the shooting site. There, Signe Waller was among the new widows of the slain WVO leaders. Schlosser remembers their stoic demeanors.

“They were so icy and they weren’t crying,” Schlosser said in an interview thirteen years later. “They seemed more like ideologues than human. That was a part of their persona—that the cause is bigger than one individual.”

The hours after the shooting were busy for the media, Schlosser said. The television footage was shown constantly on all of the city’s major networks, and it was graphic, he said.

“Even the most conservative people were astonished to see these most low life rednecks,” Schlosser said. “The looks in their faces were so disgusting.”

Despite the graphic nature of the footage, the media was not criticized for showing it, Schlosser said, because they were not using the footage to titillate people.

“To not show that stuff would have been an injustice,” he said.

The top story in most major daily newspapers across the country had a dateline of Greensboro, Schlosser said. And The Greensboro Record, then an afternoon newspaper, worked double-time to include the story in that afternoon’s edition, which greatly boosted circulation for the day as well.

And although the certain sectors of the community were shaken up, the community at large did not appear to be affected in its everyday activities. “That Saturday night you could have gone out and not known anything had happened,” Schlosser said.

**KKK and WVO Conflict**

There was an enormous amount of publicity surrounding the KKK protest rally organized by the WVO, Cavin said. The WVO used the event as an open challenge to the KKK. There were signs posted on almost every Greensboro telephone pole, announcing the rally as a “Death to the Klan.”

“They dared the Klan to come fight and face the wrath of the people,” Cavin said. “We invite you (Klansmen) and your two-bit punks to come out and face the wrath of the people,” said
Paul Bermanzohn of Durham in announcing the rally.”

Most thought the threat would likely invite retaliation: “Challenging the KKK? That’s like challenging a rattlesnake,” Schlosser said.

In the weeks following the shootings, the media revealed a preceding event that was determined as one of the causes of the violence.

“The Saturday incident was not the first confrontation between members of the Ku Klux Klan and the communist Workers Viewpoint Organization. That occurred last July in China Grove, where members of the two groups got into a shouting match although there was no violence.”

On July 8, four months before the shooting on Nov. 3, the KKK had rented a community space in a rural town called China Grove, North Carolina, for Klansmen to gather for a meeting. Somehow the WVO found out about the meeting and advanced on the meeting, screaming epithets. The WVO even took down the KKK’s symbolic Confederate flag and burned it.

“That really pissed them off,” said Cavin, who said he was not surprised that the KKK came back with guns. “The KKK are more likely to have guns,” he said. “These guys are big into guns. They have guns all over the house. It’s no surprise that they would show up with guns. And the other group showed up with a bunch of sticks.”

The media also reported that the KKK was targeting the leaders of the WVO. “They shot the leaders. I guess they remembered them from China Grove. I’ll always remember that—that they killed the five leaders.”

**COMMUNITY RESPONSE**

At the time of the shooting, racism and racial tension was not worse in Greensboro than in any other city or other town, Schlosser said. The most prominent event in Greensboro’s recent history at the time was the implementation of forced busing, which had been enacted nine years before.

Others reported that there was racial tension under the surface: “George Gardner, director of the N.C. Civil Liberties Union said, ‘What happened is significant because it shows a resur-
gence of the two radical ends of the political spectrum, after several years of relative quiet.’…
‘People are hurting. Unemployment has hit blacks the hardest. Whites, on the other hand, are
angry about affirmative action programs.’”54

The community was angry that something such as the KKK-WVO shootout happened in
their neighborhood. Leaders in the community hoped that Greensboro would not acquire a bad
reputation, and tried to emphasize the fact that the KKK shooters were not from Greensboro, nor
were most of the protestors. They were from surrounding cities such as Durham.55

“Meeting reporters later, a haggard Mayor Melvin tried to stress that the incident does
not reflect the racial and political climate of Greensboro.”56

POLICE CONSPIRACY?

Another area of controversy over the event was the way Greensboro police handled the
situation. There was initially confusion about where the event was supposed to be staged.

“The rally... originally was to begin at the Windsor Community Center parking lot, 1601
E. Lee St., but the starting point was switched to Morningside Homes about half a mile away.”57

WVO party leader Nelson Johnson acted as a liaison for the WVO to the police, and also
reportedly told police to keep a low profile at the event.58

“Donald Davis Jr., 28, a photographer at the scene... said he had overheard policemen
in a patrol car at the scene radio that they were leaving the area. He said that the demonstrators
had begun chanting ‘Pigs go home,’ and, ‘We don’t need you.’”59

But Cavin believes that the police didn’t take the WVO seriously, and perhaps thought the
rally’s prominence was being overrated. “They were just a fringe radical group,” Cavin said.
“People weren’t listening. The revolution wasn’t working.”60

This led to a conspiracy theory developed by the WVO, who saw the police as henchmen
of the government, Cavin said. They believed the conspiracy led all the way up to President
Carter.61
“Most reporters knew that it wasn’t that the cops were deliberately letting the KKK in,” Schlosser said. “I’ve always argued that if it was a police conspiracy then black officers would not have been involved.”

Most of the Greensboro community doubted the conspiracy theory, and Cavin said some members of the WVO might have even used the slayings to benefit their cause. “Sampson was quoted in trial as saying, ‘We needed a couple of martyrs,’” Cavin said.

Overall, the event is one that Greensboro residents and reporters remember to this day. The widespread media coverage of the event helped form public opinion. The video news footage that was taped at the scene helped the community see for itself the events and based on that account, the community was able to conclude its own opinions.

Schlosser summarizes the brutality of the event distinctly.

“It was like using an atom bomb to kill a gnat,” he said.
Notes


2 Ibid.

3 Jim Schlosser, interview by author, Greensboro, N.C., 7 November 2002.

4 Cavin, interview.

5 Ibid.

6 Ibid.

7 Ibid.

8 Ibid.

9 Ibid.

10 Ibid.

11 Ibid.


13 Cavin, interview.

14 Ibid.

15 Scism, “Four Die.”

16 Cavin, interview.


18 Cavin, interview.

19 Ibid.

20 Ibid.

21 Ibid.

22 Cavin, “Without Warning.”

23 Cavin, interview.

24 Ibid.

25 Ibid.
26 Ibid.
27 Cavin, “Without Warning.”
28 Cavin, interview.
29 Ibid.
30 Scism, “Four Die.”
31 Cavin, interview.
32 Scism, “Four Die.”
33 Ibid.
34 Schlosser, interview.
35 Ibid.
36 Ibid.
37 Ibid.
38 Ibid.
39 Ibid.
40 Ibid.
41 Ibid.
42 Ibid.
43 Cavin, interview.
44 Ibid.
45 “Klan ambush kills 4 WVO people.” The Greensboro Record. 3 Nov. 1979.
46 Schlosser, interview.
49 Cavin, interview.
50 Ibid.
51 Ibid.
52 Schlosser, interview.
53 Schlosser, interview.
55 Schlosser, interview.
56 Schlosser, “Why was this city.”
58 Schlosser, interview.
60 Cavin, interview.
61 Ibid.
62 Schlosser, interview.
63 Cavin, interview.
64 Schlosser, interview.
65 Ibid.