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Ollie Sumrall Jr.

Quitman, Mississippi, 1959

In October 1942, while three-year-old Ollie Sumrall Jr. slept in his bed at his family's home in Quitman, Mississippi, a group of White men abducted two Black teenage boys from the Clarke County Jail across town. The teenagers had been accused of threatening a White girl. The men drove them to an abandoned bridge over the nearby Chickasawhay River, put nooses around their necks, and hanged them.

It was not the first time Black people had been hanged from the bridge.

In December 1918, four Black men and women, two brothers and two sisters, both sisters pregnant, one just sixteen years old, were hanged from the bridge after their White boss was shot to death. Between 1888 and 1942, at least ten Black people were lynched in Clarke County, not counting the unborn children of the sisters.

The bridge became known locally as “the hanging bridge.” The historian Jason Morgan Ward later wrote that it “boasted a history as gory as any lynching site in America.” Langston Hughes penned a poem dedicated to the memory of the 1942 lynching victims called “The Bitter River.”¹

Growing up in Clarke County, Sumrall heard stories about the lynchings from his father and others. He heard stories about the bridge. His father used those stories as object lessons to teach his children how to behave around White people. Those stories instilled fear in the mind of the young Sumrall, as they likely did for many Black residents of Clarke County. That fear and the racial hatred that was all around him shaped his personality and every aspect of his behavior—where he went, the ways he spent his time, how he acted, what he said, and to whom he spoke.

Born in the land of the free, Sumrall never felt free in Mississippi. “That’s why I left,” he said.²

Sumrall was born in 1939 in Quitman, the seventh of ten children, and the youngest boy, born to Ollie and Girlia Sumrall. His parents moved to Mississippi from a small town in Alabama, about a half hour east of



Ollie Sumrall Jr. in front of Charles Street African Methodist Episcopal Church in Roxbury, 2021. Photograph by Gregory Groover; used with permission.



Abandoned bridge over the Chickasawhay River in rural Clarke County, Mississippi, where at least six Black people were hanged in the early 1900s. It became known locally as “the hanging bridge.” Ollie Sumrall was three years old and sleeping in his bed in nearby Quitman when two of those people were hanged in 1942, and he grew up hearing stories about the lynchings. Photograph by Andrew Lichtenstein; used with permission.

Quitman. He does not know how they ended up there, though they had many relatives in Clarke County. When Ollie Jr. was a baby, his father worked for the Gulf, Mobile, and Ohio Railroad, laying track. Eventually, he saved enough money to buy a two-acre lot in Quitman, where he built a house for his family. He bought an additional hundred acres bordering that lot and began to farm. He raised corn, cotton, peas, and peanuts to sell. He was unusual among Black farmers in Mississippi at the time because he owned his land. Many were tenant farmers or sharecroppers, struggling year in and year out, while their White landlords prospered from their work.

Machines had transformed American agriculture, but Black farmers like Ollie Sr. practiced a primitive form of farming because they could not afford the expensive equipment. He owned horses and mules, but not a tractor. He put his mule in a harness to plow his fields. He hitched his mule

to a wagon to haul his crops downtown to sell. The entire family helped in the fields. Ollie Jr. spent most of his free time there, plowing, picking peas, pulling peanuts from the soil, and placing them in burlap bags. Beside the family house, Sumrall's father grew a wide range of vegetables and fruits for family meals in a kitchen garden. He also raised pigs, turkeys, and chickens.

"He grew everything we ate," Sumrall said.

Although his mother occasionally cooked, cleaned, and washed clothes in the houses of White families, mostly she stayed home to raise her large family. "She had plenty to do at home," he recalled.

Ollie adored his mother's cooking, a characteristic that seems ubiquitous among Black men of his generation. She cooked chicken with gravy, rice with gravy, butter beans, collard greens, and sweet potato pie, typical Black southern food. "I don't think anybody could beat my mother's cooking," he said. "I liked it all, except the cabbage."

The Sumrall family lived in a white frame house on the north side of Quitman in the Black section of the city. There were so many Sumralls living in the area—one of his grandfathers had twenty kids—that it became known as "Sumrall town." Ollie Jr. had aunts and uncles, nieces and nephews, and cousins who lived nearby. The house had six rooms, including four bedrooms, and a big front porch. Ollie shared a bedroom with three brothers, though he always had his own bed. There was a piano in the living room.

"My family wasn't poor," he said. "My dad farmed all the time. He did pretty good. We didn't worry about nothing. He sent two kids to college."

Sumrall's mother and father were deeply religious. Every Sunday morning, the entire family attended the Pearlie Grove Baptist Church, a few blocks from their home. Ollie Sr. parented with a light hand, according to his son, and required little of his children. He did not force them to help in the fields. He did not push them to go to college. But he did require them to go to church every Sunday. Ollie's father was an officer in the church. Ollie's brother, Arthur, played piano during services. His sister, Oudia Faye, was a member of the choir. Ollie went to church every Sunday, but his parents' strong religious beliefs didn't rub off on him until much later, long after he moved to Boston.

The elder Sumrall awoke every morning before dawn to work in the fields so that he could take advantage of the coolest temperatures of the day. When it got too hot to work, he came home, sat on the front porch, and read his Bible. "Daddy was a very religious man," Sumrall said. "He was in church all the time. My mother and father, all they talked about was religion."

Quitman was a typical small county seat and market center in the Jim Crow South. The town's population was just under two thousand in 1950. Black people made up about a third of residents and lived on the north side. White residents lived nearer to downtown.³ Black people worked in a sawmill in town or on farms. Some were employed at a large textile mill in Stonewall, northwest of Quitman. Agriculture was important in Clarke County, but the northern half of the county around Quitman was hilly and less dependent on cotton than other parts of Mississippi.

Quitman was rigidly segregated. Black and White youth attended separate schools. The public swimming pool was off limits to Black people, as was a beach in a nearby state park. Black people were allowed to fish at the park only if they accompanied a White person. Sumrall sometimes went there with a White man who employed his mother. The town was too small to have many Black-owned businesses, other than juke joints. Black and White shoppers patronized the same stores, but Black customers knew to allow Whites to be served before them, even if they arrived later. Black people were expected to be off the streets downtown by nightfall.

The bus station in Quitman had separate waiting rooms, ticket windows, and restrooms for Black and White people.⁴ There were designated White and "Colored" water fountains in public buildings. "I wondered why," Sumrall said. "All of us are made the same."

Black moviegoers were required to sit upstairs at the Majestic Theater downtown, while Whites sat downstairs. Black people had to enter the theater via a fire escape that went up the side of the building. Sumrall went to movies there about once a month until he was in high school and became more socially aware. But he and a friend decided to stop going to the theater because of the restrictions. "We said it isn't right," he said. "We never went back."

As in the rest of the South, White-owned restaurants forbade Black customers from entering through the front door or being served in their dining rooms. They were required to go to the back door for service. Sumrall said White restaurants in Quitman typically had a single, small table in the back for Black diners, but only four people could be seated there at a time. Sumrall got tired of that, too. He said he ate at a White-owned restaurant only once for that reason. "That didn't suit me," he said. In the late 1940s, a Black brick mason, Rufus McRee, a distant cousin of Sumrall's, built a brick hotel in town. The McRee Hotel also housed a restaurant, grocery, beauty salon, and



The McRee Hotel in Quitman, Mississippi, built by a Black brick mason, Rufus McRee, a distant cousin of Ollie Sumrall, in the late 1940s. It housed a restaurant, grocery, beauty salon, and barbershop and became a center of Black life in the city. Used with permission, Historic Resources Inventory, Historic Preservation Division, Mississippi Department of Archives and History.

barbershop. It became the center of Black community life in Quitman for two decades.⁵

The public infrastructure in Quitman was different in the White and Black sections of town. There were streetlights and sidewalks in White sections, but not in Black areas. White homes had electricity and running water, but Black homes did not for much of the time Sumrall was growing up. Many streets in Black sections were unpaved. The Sumrall family obtained water from a pump beside their back porch. There was an outhouse nearby. Their only lights were kerosene lamps. To heat water for baths, they built a fire beneath a big black pot in the backyard and carried water into the house one bucket at a time.

The McRee Hotel was the first Black-owned building in town to have running water. The Sumrall family finally obtained electricity and indoor plumbing in the early 1950s, when Ollie was about thirteen or fourteen years old.

“Whites had it all,” Sumrall said. “Blacks didn’t have anything.”

Black adults were prevented from voting in Clarke County for decades. Civil rights legislation enacted by Congress in 1957 and 1960 authorized the Department of Justice to file lawsuits to help Black people obtain the right to vote. One of the first such voting discrimination suits targeted Clarke County. The Justice Department sent a young, Harvard-educated lawyer, Gerald M. Stern, there to investigate and he later wrote about that experience. Stern reported that “the White political structure of Clarke County did not admit any Negroes to register to vote for at least thirty years” and that “none of the Negroes in Clarke County had ever heard of a Negro’s being permitted to register.”

White government officials in Clarke County, and throughout Mississippi, used a variety of tactics to prevent Black people from registering. Applicants were required to fill out a lengthy application (investigators found that White voters often were not). They were required to interpret one of 265 sections of the Mississippi constitution, typically an especially difficult section (Whites seldom had to pass any such test).

County officials often made excuses to discourage Black people who sought to register. They would claim they were out of registration forms. Or they told them they would have to register when the registrar was in the office, but said he was out. Whites were permitted to register with the deputy clerk. Black people told Stern that sometimes they were simply refused without any reason given. One Black man, Samuel Owens, a Black school principal for fifty years, so respected in the community that his school was named for him, told investigators he had been prevented from registering seven times in four years.

When the federal lawsuit was heard in court in 1962, Clarke County’s registrar of voters, A. L. Ramsey, a frail, eighty-two-year-old White man who had been registrar since 1953, testified that when Black people tried to register, he asked them to go home and reconsider. “Well, during that time, that was when we were having a lot of trouble over the country,” he told the court. “Mississippi wasn’t having any trouble. I would always just tell them that I wasn’t going to refuse them the opportunity to register, but then I would just like for us to consider this matter, that due to the fact that they were having trouble in other parts of the country and that we folks here in Mississippi, White and colored, were getting along together and they were our friends and we were their friends and we weren’t going to have any trouble either way, and then I just suggested to them that they go back home and consider this matter and think it over and come back later.”⁶

Such was the racial climate in which Sumrall was raised, and it had an oppressive impact on him. It continued to shape his life even after he moved to Boston.

Growing up in Quitman, Sumrall rarely left his home, except to go to school or church. He had few friends. He mostly kept to himself. That was intentional. Staying at home and being alone were defense mechanisms to ensure his safety. During the week, he would go to school, come home, work in the fields until dinner, eat, take a bath, and then go to bed. On Saturdays, he might play basketball or baseball. On Sundays, he went to church. He rarely went downtown or to stores. "It was safe there at the house," he said. "I didn't go nowhere."

Sumrall's father had taught him about Clarke County's troubled racial history. He heard rumors about other horrific acts. Some of the stories he tells do not appear to be true, at least based on the well-developed historical record about Clarke County's racial past. The threat of violence was used to intimidate Black people in Clarke County, and that may have encouraged unsubstantiated rumors to spread. He said, for example, that he heard when he was ten or eleven that White men killed multiple Black boys and dragged their bodies through the streets behind a vehicle. He said that a Clarke County sheriff, who had been implicated in earlier lynchings, "died a hard death." None of that appears to have happened, but it had a chilling effect on Sumrall nevertheless.

"It scared us," he said. "That's why I didn't do anything. That's why I didn't go anywhere."

Sumrall's father instructed his son to avoid interacting with White people. If a White spoke to him, his father said, he should always show proper respect. If he went to a store, he should allow White customers to be served before him. Like Black parents of males throughout the South, his father reserved his strongest warnings for young Ollie about White women. Stay away from them, he said. Don't look at them. Don't talk to them. Don't respond to them in any way. Black males throughout the South knew that if they even looked at a White woman in the wrong way that they could end up dead.

Sumrall developed a fear of White women as a result that would influence his behavior even after he moved to Boston. "As a kid growing up, my dad told us to leave White people alone," he said. "They were very prejudiced. He told us to mind our own business, don't say nothing to them, that way you won't get in any trouble. That's the way we were raised up."

Still, in a small town in the Deep South where White residents made up most of the population and there were few Black-owned businesses, it was impossible to avoid Whites altogether. The young Sumrall kept silent wherever he went. “They call you ‘nigger’ in a minute—‘Nigger, where you going?’” he recalled. “I didn’t open my mouth. I kept walking.” If he ran an errand for his parents, say to pick up a bag of sugar at a grocery, and somebody called him “nigger,” he would not respond. He simply turned around and walked back home without getting whatever he came to the store to buy. “That’s how I got along,” he said. “Don’t say nothing and keep my mouth closed.”

Sumrall said that not all White people in Quitman were racist. His father occasionally worked for a White man who lived near them and owned a large farm. His father helped him in the garden and mowed the family’s lawn. Ollie became friends with his son, who was a couple years older than he was. The family erected a basketball net in their backyard. Ollie would play basketball with the son, or they shot marbles. “They didn’t care about no color,” he said. “They didn’t feel like they were no better than nobody else. They didn’t figure they were better than the Blacks. They said, ‘We all have to live together.’ We didn’t have no problem.”

As those experiences suggest, Sumrall’s memories of his childhood are not entirely negative, despite the racism all around him. He had fun. He played baseball and basketball. He fished. He shot marbles. He had a girlfriend when he was in high school. He had a loving family, with many brothers and sisters, which helped insulate him from all that was bad about Quitman. “I had a nice boyhood,” he said. “We just lived the way the Lord wants us to live. God likes peace. God doesn’t like arguments. He wants us to be happy. I was on the happy side.”

There do not appear to have been any lynchings in Clarke County after the two teenage boys were hanged in 1942, perhaps because past killings had drawn national attention. The FBI investigated those lynchings, but nothing came of it. The National Association for the Advancement of Colored People sent undercover investigators to Clarke County. The *Chicago Defender*, a Black newspaper with a national audience, twice sent reporters to the county and wrote three articles about hangings there.⁷

But White people in Clarke County continued to use violence, and violent threats, to control Black residents, particularly after a local civil rights movement emerged in the early 1960s. Black people who spoke to federal attorneys investigating voting rights discrimination were threatened. After Black people boycotted White-owned businesses in the town of Shubuta and then staged a

march through the city, police officers attacked marchers with clubs. A cross was burned on the lawn of the house where a local civil rights leader lived.⁸

In the summer of 1966, a mimeographed flier circulated in Clarke County that warned Blacks in stark terms [mistakes retained from the original]: “NIGGERS BEWARE! All niggers will be shot and killed if any demonstrations accure in Mississippi. All kinky head darkies better stay on your guard, and cut out all this smart allic demonstrations. If you find your car windows dash in and it burn up, or your wife hanging on a light pole, or kids strung up in the outdoor toilet, it will be alright.”⁹

One of Sumrall’s cousins in Quitman, John Otis Sumrall, who grew up next door to the McRee Hotel, was one of the leaders of civil rights efforts in Clarke County. He was once jailed for punching a sheriff’s deputy. Ollie was four years ahead of John Otis in school, so he may not have seen the potential for social change that became apparent just a few years later. Ollie never had any desire to challenge the White power structure in Quitman or become involved in the civil rights movement. He never became politically active in Boston either.¹⁰ “I didn’t think it was worth it,” he said.

Progress was slow for Black people in small towns in the Deep South, but they did benefit from incremental improvements. There were no Black high schools in Clarke County until after World War II, but southern states gradually increased their funding for Black schools as a way to avoid integration. In 1896, the US Supreme Court, in *Plessy v. Ferguson*, ruled that segregation by race was legal so long as facilities were equal. White and Black schools in the South during the Jim Crow era were rarely equal, but southern states thought they could better convince judges that they were by making funding more equitable.¹¹

Between 1910 and 1950, states such as Alabama and Louisiana more than doubled their per pupil funding for Black schools as a ratio of funding for White schools. Still, Mississippi was considered the most racist state in the South and lagged other states in boosting Black school funding.¹² In Clarke County, though, school officials closed most of the county’s most decrepit Black schools, many of them one-room cabins in the country, and built new schools. With state funds, the county also built its first two Black high schools. In 1955, one year after the Supreme Court overturned the “separate but equal” doctrine in *Brown v. Board of Education* and outlawed segregated schools, Clarke County spent \$91 per Black student and \$168 each for White students.

When Sumrall entered high school, Quitman's Black high school was relatively new. The state Sovereignty Commission, formed to investigate civil rights efforts in the state, observed that the county's Black high schools were "newer and nicer than White school buildings."¹³ Sumrall agreed with that assessment. Unlike Black students elsewhere, he said he never had to use dirty, outdated textbooks passed down from White schools. Though he acknowledged that Black schools were inferior to White schools, he insisted they provided a good-quality education.

To prove his point, he noted that his brother, Arthur, got a sufficient education in Quitman to go to college and medical school, become a physician, and have a long and successful career as a dermatologist in Indianapolis. Sumrall himself was held back after the tenth grade, which suggests that his school was challenging and sought to make sure Black pupils received an adequate education.

Because Sumrall struggled in school, he never considered going to college. In high school, he worked at an auto body shop in Quitman. He thought if he stayed in town after he graduated he could continue to work at the body shop. His father quit farming the year before Sumrall finished high school, once he turned seventy. He was physically worn out from decades of working on the railroad and in his fields, his son said. But Ollie Jr. never had any desire to take over his father's farm. None of his siblings chose to farm either. "I wouldn't want to do no farming," he said. "I just didn't like it. The sun is hot. You had to get up early and go out in the fields. I didn't want that type of life."

Sumrall graduated from Quitman's Black high school, Shirley-Owens High School, in 1959. For Black males in Mississippi at the time, there were few career options other than farming. Quitman had its sawmill and a cotton gin. Stonewall had its textile factory, where they made blue jeans. He was not interested in any of those options. Once upon a time, he had dreamed of becoming a musician, but then "got girl crazy," he said, and never learned how to play the piano as intended. He decided instead to leave Quitman and leave the South.

"I was just tired of Mississippi," he said.

The destinations of Black migrants who left the South was strongly influenced by geography. Historically, Black people in the Southeast migrated to cities like Washington, Philadelphia, and New York because they were closest. Migrants from Louisiana and Texas, in contrast, often headed to California. Most Black migrants from Mississippi ended up in Chicago

because it was a straight line north, and they could travel there easily. Migrants traveled initially aboard the Illinois Central Railroad, which ran from New Orleans to Chicago. Later they went on buses that traveled north on Interstate 55.¹⁴ Boston had few Mississippi-born Black people, because it was a long way away. Quitman is 1,341 miles from Boston, but Chicago is only 756 miles.

Sumrall had a friend, Flossie Moore, who had migrated to Chicago and encouraged him to move there. They had grown up on the same street. She was two years ahead of him in school. She eventually married Sumrall's cousin. "She wrote me a letter and told me to come to Chicago," he said. "Flossie told me she would find me a place to stay if I come there." Sumrall's father offered to pay his bus fare. "If I can send my two kids to college I can send you to Chicago," he told his son.

Black people had been leaving Clarke County for decades, owing at least partly to its history of violence against them, and everyday mistreatment. The county's Black population declined by nearly half from 1910 to 1970. In thirty years following World War II, the county lost nearly three thousand Blacks.¹⁵ Some Black migrants followed the same path as family and neighbors, helping to create distinct ethnic enclaves in faraway cities. In 1927, a traveling preacher from Shubuta in southern Clarke County relocated to Albany, New York, bought land, and encouraged Black people from back home to join him. Black migrants from Shubuta helped create Albany's Rapp Road community.¹⁶

Gerald Stern, the Department of Justice attorney who traveled to Clarke County in 1961 to investigate voting rights discrimination and interviewed many local residents, wrote, "High school graduation day—for those who finish high school—is often their last day in Clarke County. It's the kind of place people leave."

By the time Sumrall graduated from high school in May 1959, two of his siblings had relocated to Boston and a third was planning to join them. But Ollie still intended to go to Chicago, at least until his brother and family came to Quitman for a visit. Sumrall's oldest brother, Job, left Quitman to join the military, serving in the army. Toward the end of his service, he was transferred to Fort Devens in the Boston suburbs. He was stationed there when he was discharged. Like many Black men, he first experienced life outside the segregated South in the military.

Job liked Boston, his brother said, so he decided to stay there after his military service ended. He got a job at American Biltrite, a

rubber-manufacturing plant in Chelsea, where he made heels for shoes. He lived in Roxbury with his family. Sumrall's sister, Betty, had also moved to Boston with a friend after graduating high school. She worked in a nursing home. She later married and had a family in Boston, staying there until she got sick a few years ago.

In June 1959, Job drove to Quitman with his wife and two young children for a two-week visit. Sister Fay, who still lived in Quitman, planned to go with them when they returned to Boston. But Fay got pregnant and decided at the last minute not to go. One night, shortly after Job arrived in Quitman, he and Ollie were sitting on the porch talking. Since Fay was no longer planning to move to Boston, Job now had an empty seat in his car for the return trip. Ollie asked him if he could go to Boston with him. He was nineteen years old. "C'mon, let's go," Job told him.

Ollie thought about it and the night before his brother was scheduled to leave, he decided to move to Boston. He packed a suitcase and they left the next day. So much for the idea that migrants plot and scheme for years before moving. The decision to migrate is sometimes more spontaneous. "I didn't know anything about Boston," Sumrall said. "I didn't know nothing about it."

Ollie and Job drove to Boston without stopping, except for gas and meals. Blacks traveling in the Jim Crow South had difficulty finding motels that would allow them to stay the night. They took turns driving. When one drove, the other slept. Sumrall moved in with his brother and his family. They had an apartment in a three-family house on Warren Street in Roxbury, the same street on which Charles Street African Methodist Episcopal Church is located.

Boston was a fundamental change for a young man who had spent his entire life in a small town in the Deep South. Before coming to Boston, the farthest Sumrall had ever traveled from home was to Tuskegee, Alabama, a three-and-a-half-hour drive, where two of his siblings went for college. He noticed differences in Boston right away. When he went to a corner store to buy a soda, he learned that carbonated beverages were called "tonics" in Boston and that you had to pay a return deposit on bottles. You never had to do that in Mississippi. Shortly after he arrived in Boston, he experienced his first hailstorm.

But the biggest change for Sumrall was being apart from his mother and father for the first time. One day he was sitting alone on the back porch of his

brother's apartment and he broke down, crying. "I didn't like it at first," he recalled sixty years later. "Tears come out of my eyes. I said, 'What am I doing here?' I got lonesome for home."

Sumrall got a job at the Regal Restaurant in Roxbury, on the same street where he lived, through his brother's wife, who had an uncle who worked there. He washed dishes at first, but over time did a little of everything. He became a short-order cook. He liked it.

One day, a White woman who was eating at the restaurant became friendly with him. They got to talking and she eventually asked him if he would like to go to a movie sometime. What a change that represented from his life in Mississippi, where he was forbidden from even eating in the same restaurants as White people. In Boston, he quickly discovered, he could go to any restaurant he desired, eat beside Whites sitting at the next table, and talk to whomever he chose.

But the exchange frightened him, because he had been taught in Mississippi that he should never, ever speak to a White woman, except to say, "Yes, ma'am" or "No, ma'am." Attempting to bridge that divide was perhaps the greatest violation of social codes that existed in the Jim Crow South. Even though he had left the South, the racial code that Sumrall learned in Mississippi was still imprinted on his psyche. He never went out on a date with the woman. "It didn't feel right," he said. "I thought about the things happening down south. All that was in my mind. I thought it might be the same way. I said, 'No, this ain't right,' so I never did go."

The racism that shaped Sumrall's lifestyle growing up in Mississippi also had permanent impacts. In Quitman, he chose to stay home and keep to himself for safety reasons. In Boston, he behaved the same way. It had become part of his personality. "I still like to be by myself," he said.

Sumrall worked at the restaurant for three years, until it closed following the death of one of its owners. He then got a job at a tire store in Cambridge, changing tires and doing mechanical work. He worked there for more than a decade. The job paid better than the restaurant. He continued to live with his brother and his family, even after they moved to another apartment and eventually bought their own two-family house in Dorchester. He always had his own bedroom. He was part of the family, got along well with his sister-in-law and the kids. They encouraged him to stay. He did not get his own place until he married.

Sumrall grew to like Boston. He liked that he could walk out his front door and take a bus most anywhere. He went to the beach. Basketball had always

been his favorite sport and he became a Boston Celtics fan at a time when the team won ten titles in twelve years, led by outspoken Black center Bill Russell, whose family had migrated from Louisiana to California. He went to many Celtics games at the Boston Garden. He appreciated the ways in which Boston was different from the South. "I had more freedom," he said. "I could do things here I couldn't do in Mississippi."

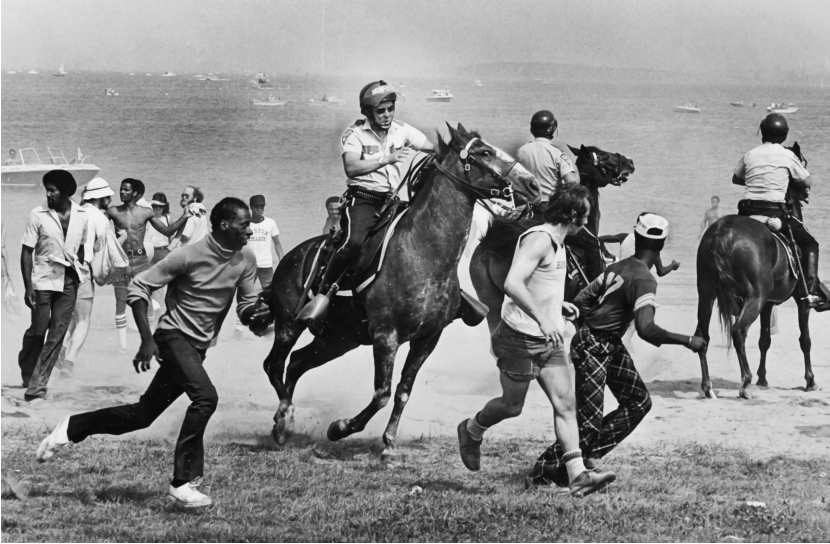
Sumrall met his first wife, Dolores Drew, in the mid-1960s through her brother, one of his coworkers at Cambridge Tire. The siblings lived together and Ollie met her one day when he visited his friend. She had moved to Boston from North Carolina several years before. They married about 1968 and got an apartment on Warren Street in Roxbury. They quickly had two children, Joseph and Sharon. Because they both worked full time, they sent the kids to North Carolina to be raised by their maternal grandmother. But the marriage failed, and they broke up in 1972. "She was one of those kind that like to go out," he said, "and I didn't."

About a year after his marriage ended, he met his second wife, Martha Jones. Like Dolores, she had moved to Boston from the South. She grew up in Selma, Alabama, a two-hour drive from Quitman. They met at a cookout, then went, ironically it would turn out, to a nightclub. She was a nurse at a Veterans Administration hospital. They moved in together. She had four kids from previous relationships, and they raised them jointly. They eventually had two kids of their own, Dwayne and Michael. They did not marry until after their kids were born.

"She was a nice girl," he said. "We hit it off. She didn't like to hang out in clubs and bars. All the rest of them, they like to hang out and get high. It wasn't for me."

About 1973, Sumrall left his job at the tire shop and went to work at a liquor store in Roxbury, even though, he said, "I couldn't stand liquor." In 1986, he got a job as a security guard at Roxbury Community College. He liked that job and worked there for twenty-six years, retiring in 2012. Ollie and Martha lived at first in a Dorchester apartment. Then, in 1978, Sumrall bought a two-family house on Ford Street in Dorchester, where he still lives. He now lives there with his two sons. A stepdaughter lives in the other half of the house.

Sumrall was not religious growing up, despite the efforts of his mother and father, but eventually their influence had an impact. Although he did not go to church during his first two decades in Boston, about 1980 he reconsidered. His family had always attended a Baptist church in Mississippi, but he said there were no Baptist churches near his home in Boston. A friend



Mounted Boston police separate Black and White beachgoers on Carson Beach in South Boston in 1975. Ollie Sumrall stopped going to Carson Beach during this time because racial conflicts became common. Photograph by George Rizer, *Boston Globe*; used with permission, Getty Images.

told him about a church just down the street from where Sumrall was living. That church was Charles Street AME on Warren Street in Roxbury. Sumrall started attending Charles Street and has done so ever since. He did not see the differences between Baptist and AME churches as important, though his wife continued to attend a Baptist church.

“My mother and father always wanted me to go to church,” he said. “I started going and never stopped. I don’t know what changed. God can change anybody.”

He and his wife were married for more than thirty years. They visited the South every year—spending two weeks with her family in Selma and two weeks with his in Quitman. Martha died in 2012 after a long illness. She suffered from diabetes, was on dialysis, and succumbed to heart failure. “We had a good time,” he said.

Although Sumrall appreciated Boston’s advantages over Mississippi from the moment he arrived, he also quickly discovered, like most Black people, that Boston’s benefits were relative and that racism was prevalent in the city. That surprised him at first. He expected it to be better. But he saw racism in

the way that some Whites looked at him. He could see it in their eyes and in the way they treated him. He lived through the busing years, when racism in Boston was most overt and ugly. There was a time when he would not go to Carson Beach in South Boston, the closest beach to his home, because Blacks were expected to remain on one side of the beach, and fights between White and Black beachgoers were common. Sometimes police had to separate them.¹⁷

Sumrall believes racism in Boston has diminished over time but still exists, even if it is expressed differently than in the South. “Down there they let you know that they’re racist,” he said. “Here they hide it. They don’t want you to know that they’re racist. They do it in a sneaky way. It wasn’t as great here as I thought it would be, but I learned to live with it.”

In Sumrall’s more than six decades in Boston, he has always lived in Roxbury or Dorchester in the heart of Boston’s Black community. He has never considered living anywhere else. All but one of his jobs was also located in that part of Boston. Like most of the people profiled for this project, he chose to remain in Black neighborhoods because he prefers them, not because he was prevented from living elsewhere by housing discrimination. He likes where he lives because it reminds him of the South, minus the White people. Most of his friends over the years have been southerners. Many of those he met through his church. It is telling that both of Sumrall’s wives were southern born and bred. Because of that, his adjustment to Boston was relatively easy and quick. “Most of the people I’ve been associated with here were from the South,” he said. “Even my neighbors, they’re from somewhere down south. I enjoy them. It feels like home. I never knew too many people from Boston.”

Asked if he gave up anything significant in leaving Mississippi and moving north, Sumrall responds bluntly. “Yeah, I gave up being around White folks,” he said. “I can avoid them here.”

Sumrall’s life may appear unremarkable. It may not seem to be a resounding confirmation of the benefits of the Great Migration. What he has gained has been more subtle and personal. He achieved his goals. He made enough money to buy his own home. He has a loving family, with many grandkids and great-grandchildren. Most of his children live nearby. He got what he wanted—except the Cadillac he coveted when he was younger. “Too expensive,” he said.

Moving to Boston has allowed Sumrall to do what he wants, go where he chooses, speak his mind, and, above all, to be the person he wished to be. It

has allowed him the freedom to live without fear. His desires were simple, but he could not fulfill them in Mississippi.

“If I had to do it all over again, I’d come right to Boston,” he said. “I have a good life up here. It turned out very nice.”