

“A DEATH FOR DIXIE”

Michael Westerman was a rowdy nineteen-year-old who drove around Todd County, Kentucky, with a Confederate flag flying from his pickup. Then he died for it, and the new network of resentment won't let him rest.

Tony Horwitz *The New Yorker Magazine*, March 18, 1996, p 64.

Michael Westerman, his mother says, "was a country boy and proud of it." He drove a big Chevy four-by-four with the chassis jacked high above oversized tires and bought a decal that said "Redneck Ride." He loved Jeff Foxworthy jokes ("You might be a redneck if you've ever taken a beer to a job interview"), and when he wasn't cutting logs in the woods he wore what amounted to a personal uniform: black Levi's, black cowboy hat, cowboy boots, and a belt buckle the size of a salad plate. Soon after his nineteenth birthday, nearly two years ago, Westerman got a tattoo on his arm of the cartoon character Tasmanian Devil clutching a Confederate battle flag. He also welded a pole to the toolbox in the back of his pickup so that he could display a large Confederate flag there. "That flag was a symbol of him," his sister-in-law Sarah Belanger says. "He was a rebel, a daredevil, outspoken. He'd do anything."

Rebel flags are common in Todd County, Kentucky, a rural enclave an hour's drive north of Nashville, Tennessee. Sports teams at the county's high school are called the Rebels and have as their mascot two flag-holding Confederates. But the sight of Westerman's banner steaming behind the big red pickup - which also had a rebel-flag license plate - caught the eye of young people that liked slaves," one of them later said.

Westerman had grown up in the small town of Guthrie, which lies in former plantation country at Todd County's southern edge, straddling the Tennessee line. Last year, during the three-day weekend marketing Martin Luther King, Jr.'s birthday, a biker bar called Redbone's Saloon posted flyers proclaiming :Fuck Martin Luther King's B. Day" and inviting people to a "Thank God for James Earl Ray Party." The flyers promised a pool tournament and "Chicken Ribs-Fixins" for three dollars a plate.

That Saturday afternoon, in Guthrie's black neighborhood, a seventeen-year-old Damien Darden, who had borrowed his mother's car, was collecting friends for a trip to the movies. When Darden made a stop on Guthrie's main street, Michael Westerman drove past, pulling into a convenience store called Janie's Market. Darden had previously seen a red truck with a rebel flag cruising through black areas of Guthrie. "Let's go whip that dude," he declared, according to testimony by one of the car's passengers, and sped off to find friends who might want to join the fight.

Westerman pumped some gas and brought watermelon bubble gum. He climbed back in the truck and sat for a while, chatting with his wife, Hannah. The couple weren't in any hurry. High school sweethearts, they'd married soon after graduation, and a year later Hannah gave birth, prematurely, to twins. Now, five weeks after the birth, Michael and Hannah had left the babies with relatives and were headed off for their first evening alone since becoming parents. They planned to buy Hannah a denim dress and then drive into Nashville for dinner.

Damien Darden drove back to Janie's accompanied by another car of black teenagers. Hannah saw a youth lean out a window of one of the cars, pointing at the truck and laughing. Then Darden pulled up close to the truck. He and two of his friends later testified that a hand reached through the sliding back window of the truck's cab and shook the rebel flag. One of the teen-agers said someone shouted "Niggers!" Hannah testified that neither she nor her husband said or did anything. Because the truck had tinted windows, the teen-agers never saw who was inside.

A moment later, Westerman pulled out of Janie's and drove south. Near the Tennessee line, where Guthrie gives way to tobacco fields, Hannah glanced back and saw the cars from Janie's Market trailing behind. "Kick it!" she said, and Westerman floored the accelerator.

In the back seat of Darden's car, a seventeen-year-old named Freddie Morrow told his friends he had a gun. "No, you don't!" the others taunted. Morrow lifted his shirt to reveal a cheap .32 pistol tucked in his pants, and as the car began to catch up with Westerman's truck he fired his gun wildly out the window. Then the gun jammed. Darden accelerated, and pulled into the oncoming lane. The car and the truck now raced side by side, at eighty-five miles an hours. Westerman pushed his wife to the floor. Morrow stuck his hand out the passenger side window and fired again.

Hannah didn't hear the blast, but she saw her husband clutch his side and heard him moan, "Oh, my God, they shot me." She crambled over him into the driver's seat. Darden's car had stopped in the road just ahead, beside a grain elevator. The other car from Janie's had pulled up close behind the pickup. Hannah thought they were trying to box her in. She swerved off the road, bounced into a ditch, then did a U-turn and bumped back onto the road headed north to Kentucky.

By the time she reached a hospital emergency room, twenty minutes later, Westerman was in shock. The bullet had passed through his heart. Surgeons closed the wound and rushed him by ambulance to Nashville, but he died the next day. When police searched his truck, they found a single bullet hole in the door, a loaded 380 automatic that belonged to Westerman, and his black cowboy hat with a big wad of watermelon bubble gum stuck to the brim.

After the shooting, Darden, Morrow, and the other teen-agers had returned to Guthrie. The group never made it to the movie they'd planned to see: "Higher Learning," a film about racial tension at a college campus in which white supremacists gather around a rebel flag and gun down a black student. Instead, late that night, they turned themselves in to the police.

At news of the incident spread across the South, conservative guardians of Southern heritage pronounced Michael Westerman a Confederate martyr and the first man to die under the rebel flag in a hundred and thirty years. He was buried in a Confederate-flag-draped coffin, and his grave became a Confederate shrine, with latter-day rebels trekking to Guthrie to pay their respects. But the drama that unfolded in the year following Westerman's death - Klan protests, a school-mascot fight, cries for secession, and a courtroom recitation from the Gettysburg Address-revealed that Michael Westerman had also become a catalyst for a very contemporary conflict: over race, over memory, over civil rights. Like the flag on his truck, Westerman and the black teen-agers arrested for his murder have become potent symbols in a cultural war flaring across the South. It is a struggle fueled by a burgeoning and sophisticated cadre of Southern "nationalists" who feed on modern fears of dwindling status and on nostalgic images of a South that is cohesive, distinct, and independent from the rest of America.

Late on the night of Westerman's death, a cross made of scrap lumber burned by the road outside Guthrie, Police suspected at first that the incident, like the James Earl Ray barbecue at Redbone's Saloon, was a protest against the Martin Luther King, Jr., holiday, but over the next few days three more crosses were up in flames - two on Guthrie's main street and one in front of the house where the gunman, Freddie Morrow, lived. The F.B.I. investigated but made no arrests.

Redbone's Saloon forms Guthrie's southern portal, so I stopped in there on my first trip to town, a week after Westerman's burial. From the outside, the saloon looked like a bunker: squat, cinder block, with slit windows cloaked in wire mesh. Inside, Redbone himself, a ruddy-bearded man, stood behind the bar wearing a polka-dot cap and a T-shirt adorned with a swastika. He served me a beer, then turned to chat with a man whose shirtfront proclaimed, "I've Got a Nigger in my Family Tree." The back of the shirt showed a lynching - a black man dangling from a branch.

On the saloon's walls, mixed with the usual biker-bar decor - a half-naked woman splayed across a Harley-Davidson, a piston mounted on a piece of wood bearing the words "We Don't Bother Calling 911" - was an odd anthology of handscrawled verse. Most of it mingled biker and confederate themes, such as a poem describing a motorcycle tour of the ruined South of 1865, one verse of which read:

Riding through the fog,
Rebel flag in hand,
Fighting for my freedom,
Fighting for my land.

At the bottom appeared a cryptic insignia: "F.T.W."

I asked the man sitting beside me what the letters stood for.

"Who's asking?" he said. "F.B.I.?"

This bought howls from the others at the bar. I told him I was a writer, not a cop.

He looked at me dubiously but said, "F.T.W. - Fuck the World."

Another man bulging from a Lynyrd Skynyrd T-shirt, lurched over and barked, "Write this in your damned notebook!" He ranted about the blacks accused of killing Michael Westerman, and concluded, "You've got your K.K.K. and your B.B.B. - that's Badass Black Brothers. Two sides of the same coin."

He sat down with a thud and gazed blankly at the television behind the bar. Male figure skaters glided across the screen. As I scribbled down his words, I sensed someone standing behind me and turned to confront a long-haired giant. Bending so that his bloodshot eyes bore into mine, he said, by way of introduction, "I shit out a turd this morning that was bigger than you."

I nodded toward the door and said, "Maybe I should just --"

The giant grabbed one sleeve of my jacket and ripped it clearly from armpit to wrist. Redbone lunged across the bar and seized the man's other arm, shouting "Cool it!" This allowed me to dash through the door and down the road toward town, which announced itself with a sign that read:

Welcome to Guthrie
Birthplace of Robert Penn Warren
First Poet Laureate of the United States

Until Michael Westerman's death drew rebel-flag supporters from across the South, Guthrie, Kentucky, attracted only two types of travelers: literary pilgrims looking for Warren's home, and Tennesseans seeking lottery tickets available only on the Kentucky side of the line. When Warren grew up there, in the early years of the century, Guthrie was a bustling new railroad town with little sense of history - "very un-southern," as Warren later described it. Today, though, Guthrie exhales the depleted air of so many rural towns across the South, bypassed by the interstate and drained of vitality by decades of migration to the city. It has a Piggly Wiggly supermarket, the American Café ("Country cookin' make you good lookin'"), a corn warehouse, a garret factory, a company that creosotes railroad tires, and convenience stores crowded with people scratching lottery tickets. "We're a little ole Southern Mayberry," said Scott Marshall, a portly, bluff paramedic who is also Guthrie's mayor, as he swept the floor in the small town - like every town in America, probably - there's room for improvement between the races."

More than a third of Guthrie's sixteen hundred residents are black. The Mayor and the six town-council members are white. Both the ruling body of Todd County and its school board are also all white. Near Guthrie's town hall stands a derelict shop that briefly housed a tattoo parlor last year. "It was a front for the Klan," the Mayor told me. There used to be a swimming pool in Guthrie, but a few years ago some whites griped about blacks swimming there, and the motelkeepers who owned the pool filled it with dirt rather than let it become the scene of racial strife.

Most parts of the South confronted such friction's and inequities decades ago and have struggled ever since, fitfully and sometimes unwillingly, to overcome them. But Todd County doesn't belong to the New South of Atlanta or Charlotte, or to the stereotypical Old South of rural Alabama or Mississippi. Strictly speaking, it doesn't belong to the former Confederacy at all, since Kentucky never seceded from the Union, and Todd County was divided in its sympathies during the Civil War.

Because segregation never became as formalized here as it did farther south, the civil-rights movement more or less bypassed Todd County, and so did many of the dramatic social changes obvious across the Deep South. Even so, one-on-one race relations in Guthrie often exhibit an intimacy and informality uncommon in the North. Michael Westerman grew up on the same street of brick ranch houses in Guthrie as two of the teen-agers who were charged with his murder. They went to the same schools and shot hoops in the Westerman's driveway. A close relative of one of the boys was a member of the volunteer fire department along with Westerman's father, David, who farms for a living. Westerman's mother, JoAnn, runs a sewing machine at Guthrie Garment, and says she has worked amicably beside black women there for years.

But in the early nineties this racial détente began to come apart - most noticeably at Todd County Central High School. With a low-slung brick facade, bright halls and computer labs, Todd Central looks like any other public high school, except for a rebel flag on its doormat and, over the trophy case, a vast mural depicting the school's mascots: two pudgy Confederates, known to some as "the fat man," who hold battle flags and blow bugles emitting the printed words "Go Rebels, Go." In the sixties, the year-book, entitled *The Rebel*, featured two students annually anointed the General and His Southern Lady and photographed in Confederate uniform and hoopskirt.

Locals, when asked why the high school is such a Confederate redoubt, point to Todd County's most revered native son - Jefferson Davis, the Confederate President, who until the age of two lived in a log homestead on what is now the county's western edge. The site is marked by an obelisk, two-thirds as tall as the Washington Monument. Each June, in honor of Davis's birthday, the concrete spike forms the backdrop for the crowning of a local teen-ager as Miss Confederacy.

For decades, blacks in Todd County quietly endured the exaltation of the rebel flag and the defunct nation for which it stands. Black athletes at Todd Central dribbled basketballs across a huge flag painted on the gym floor. Some wore class rings decorated with a rebel soldier. "It never really dawned on me what the flag represented," I was told by Kim Gardner, a black 1980 graduate. Even if it had bothered her, she added, she doubted whether she'd have done much. "Back then, parents told you to sit your butt down, work hard, and keep your mouth shut around white people."

Gradually, though, black attitudes changed in Todd County, as they have already changed across much of the South. Public hostility toward the flag and other Confederate totems, which has been largely dormant since the early seventies, resurfaced in the eighties and has intensified ever since. In 1987, the Southeast Region of the N.A.A.C.P. passed a resolution condemning the rebel flag flying over four Southern capitols. Fights over the flag, over the playing of "Dixie," and over "Old South" balls erupted on many college campuses and in some high schools. In some cities, blacks began complaining about ubiquitous Confederate monuments and street names. In 1993, Senator Carol Moseley-Braun, of

Illinois, successfully challenged renewal of the congressional patent for the United Daughters of the Confederacy insignia. Movies like Spike Lee's *Malcolm X* and music groups like South Carolina's Da Phlayva, which reproduced the Confederate flag in African-liberation colors on a CD cover, aroused militancy among blacks too young to remember the civil-rights area.

Growing black anger over emblems of the Confederacy has provoked a backlash among some Southern whites, many of whom already felt aggrieved over the Martin Luther King, Jr., holiday, affirmative action, and other race-tinged issues. When Spike Lee's movie launched a wave of "X" clothing, for instance, a symbol sprouted on T-shirts and bumper stickers across the South: it showed the diagonal cross of the rebel flag beside the words "You Wear Your X, I'll Wear Mine."

By the time Marcus Flippin became a teacher and sports coach at Todd Central, in 1992, students were brandishing their separate "X"s like duelling pistols. White students were as far as to fly the flag from their farm vehicles during a Future Farmers of America event called Tractor Day, Blacks, who say news reports about the flag coming down in public places elsewhere in the South, often complained to Flippin, one of only three black teachers at the school. "They'd ask, 'How can they get away with it here in Todd?'" he recalls.

Flippin also learned that coaches of visiting teams were using the gym-floor painting of the flag to whip up black players, saying, "You know that that flag represents slavery and the Klan. We have to go over and show those racists." When he told school officials what was happening, they agreed to repaint the floor with an innocuous outline of Todd County. This move enraged some whites and provoked sharper skirmishes. Graffiti saying "K.K.K." began appearing in school bathrooms. Once, a white student drove his truck past a group of blacks dragging a black Barbie doll by a chain from its bumper.

Flippin's first year at Todd Central was the last for Michael Westerman, who graduated in 1993. Tall, slim, and muscular, with long dark hair and an engaging smile. Westerman was named Future Homemakers of America Sweetheart his senior year. A mediocre student, he struggled through with the help of his longtime girlfriend, Hannah Laster. In their longtime girlfriend, Hannah Laster. In their prom picture, Hannah wears a hot-pink ball gown and Michael a tuxedo jacket and a bow tie with his black Levi's and black cowboy hat.

After graduation, Hannah drove a forklift at her father's sawmill, and Westerman went to work there, too. Hannah's father, Billy Laster, is built like the trees that churn through his mill, and he prescribes work as the remedy for all ills. His wife, Nancy, like other women in her fundamentalist church, hews to a Biblical injunction against women cutting their hair, and hers is pinned up into a gray helmet rising six inches above her head. Westerman's parents are also hard-working, churchgoing folks, and they, too, married as teen-agers and rarely venture beyond Todd County.

When members of the two families recall Michael Westerman, they smile and roll their eyes, choosing words like "clown" and "character." He played pranks, made animal noises, licked his sister's face, told jokes about fat people. "Michael picked and plucked at people and laughed about everything," Nancy Laster says. But this "big picker," as Hannah calls him, wasn't always so endearing to those outside his family. Todd County is an insular place, and one does well to keep unflattering opinions of the deceased to oneself. In private, though, some of Westerman's acquaintances describe him as a loud, hot-tempered teen-ager who liked to party hard and whose joking and roughhousing were often grating and occasionally threatening.

Former co-workers across the state line, in Clarksville, Tennessee, speak more openly. At the Holiday Inn, where Westerman washed dishes his senior year, Lydia Kurz, a waitress, remembers a "goofy, obnoxious, and ignorant" teen-ager who read comic books and pestered the other staff - particularly Lydia's friend and fellow Jehovah's Witness, a waitress who has since left. One day, Westerman lifted the friend up and pinned her against the wall while she screamed, "Put me down!" When a black cook intervened, Westerman shouted racial slurs at him. Soon after the incident, Westerman was fired. Lydia's friend told me that she wasn't surprised by the news that Michael had been killed by blacks who felt provoked by the flag in his truck. He felt that "everyone around him needed to know he was bigger than them," she said.

It was an aunt of Michael's named Brenda Arms who first got Michael interested in the Confederate forebears. As Michael grew up, a childhood flag moved from his bedroom wall to his bicycle, then to his first car. "He treasured that flag just the way I do the doll I've been carrying around since I was a little girl," Brenda told me, with tears in her eyes.

Everyone has a different theory about what, precisely, the flag-on his arm, on his truck, on his wall - meant to Westerman. Brenda Arms is sure that it reflected the same pride she feels in her Southern heritage. Others suspect that it was a more generalized expression of his hell-raising nature. Hannah's father thinks that Michael was displaying loyalty to the Rebels of Todd Central. Almost nobody believes that he was making a conscious political statement, though white classmates acknowledge that the flag sent a message to blacks. "We knew it made them mad," a friend of his told me.

I saw the pickup for the first time during one of many memorials held in Westerman's honor, this one a procession of rebel-flag-waving motorcyclists called Freedom Ride '95. Hannah, a tall, hefty woman with permed strawberry-blond hair, stood by the cab dry-eyed, popping bubble gum, as well-wishers filed solemnly by, poking their little fingers in the small bullet hole in the door and peering at Westerman's cowboy hat, perched on the dashboard, with the bubble gum still stuck to it. The flag flapped from its pole in back, as it had on the day he was killed. "He wasn't into all the Confederate history, and that," Hannah told me. Then why, I asked her, did Michael fly the flag from his pickup? She shrugged, and said, "He'd do anything to make his truck look sharp. The truck's red. The flag's red. They match."

During Westerman's senior year at Todd Central, Freddie Morrow arrived from Chicago's South Side. His father, who had died in a car wreck soon after Freddie's birth, had grown up in Guthrie, so when Freddie got into trouble as a teen-ager in Chicago his mother sent him to live with an aunt in Kentucky, hoping that a fresh start in the small Southern town would settle him down.

At first, it did. Morrow began going with a girl and attending church with his relatives. The Kentucky quiet agreed with him. But Morrow, with his baggy jeans and earrings and gang tattoo, stood out at Todd Central. White teachers kept a wary eye on this city kid who had been in trouble up North, and he confirmed their fears when he talked back to them and got into frequent fights. Before long, he'd racked up so many suspensions that he was forced to repeat his sophomore year.

The following fall, he got into a dispute with a girl in Clarksville, the nearest city to Guthrie, and someone threatened to kill him. That's when Morrow got his gun, a Czech semiautomatic he bought from a white guy for fifty dollars at an abandoned baseball diamond in Guthrie. He got bullets at the Wal-Mart in Clarksville. That evening, he showed off his new purchase to a friend, firing several rounds into the air. "It just felt like all my worries was through," Morrow later recalled.

Morrow didn't know Westerman, and until he moved to Guthrie he didn't know much about the rebel flag, either. "I thought it was just the 'Dukes of hazard' sign," he said, referring to the TV series featuring a car decorated with a rebel flag. But he quickly picked up on the local black hostility to the flag. "They was telling me about how they had a war for it back in the days and all this," he said. And he sensed that to white students "it means white pride and continued slavery." But he also suspected that whites brandished the flag mainly as a sort of schoolyard challenge, "just doing it out of spite, to see what we would do."

Todd County's main crossroads lies eleven miles north of Guthrie, in Elkton, the county seat. It was here, near Todd Central, that Westerman sometimes cruised with his flag, circling the courthouse square and crawling past an adjoining series of fast-food joints. In a county with no mall or movie theater, looping between the Dairy Mart and Dairy Queen supplies about the only action available. Teen-agers in Todd County call this fifties-style ritual "flipping the dip."

When I first visited Elkton, on a Sunday morning in January soon after Westerman's death, the dip was flipping with at least five flag-toting trucks. There were also two cars with holes crudely drilled in their roofs and flagpoles poking out. One member of this makeshift color guard - an unemployed car mechanic, who was wearing a reproduction Confederate kepi and carrying a .22 pistol - had been flying the flag each day since Westerman's death. "One goes down, two fill his space," he said.

Nearby, standing at each corner of Elkton's square, a dozen people clad in jungle fatigues and combat boots were handing out flyers to the after-church traffic. "Literature roadblock," one man explained, offering me several mimeographed sheets. One was headed, "The Only Reason You Are White Today Is Because Your Ancestors Practiced & Believed in Segregation YESTERDAY!"

The literature was signed "Ron Edwards, Grand Dragon for Christ, Race & Nation." Edwards was the Klansman who now stood before me, barking undragonlike orders into a walkie-talkie, "Cross the street only on the crosswalk and stay on the goddam sidewalks!" he adjured his underlings. He looked at me and said, "I don't want us to break any laws." Edwards explained that he was the ruler over "the Realm of Kentucky," and he introduced me to two of his underlings - an Exalted Cyclops named Jim Burleson and a Klaliff named Velma Seats, a fifty-one-year-old seamstress and crafts dealer who wore furry earmuffs, boots, and green mittens. "Jelly doughnut?" she asked, proffering a cardboard box.

Passing cars honked, and their drivers gave the thumbs-up sign. When a burly man in a farm cap stopped to grouse, "I've had enough of niggers telling us what to do," Burleson and Seats escorted him to a rusted Buick parked nearby. "You can get started today for just twenty-five dollars and two photos," Burleson explained. "And if your wife wants to join, too, the price is the same." He paused. "That's sort of a special we have going now."

While Burleson recruited the man, Seats told me about her grandchildren and her craft shop, and about an upcoming cross-burning, at which she'd don a satin robe and sheets. I asked why she and the others weren't wearing their Klan robes today.

"We've had a lot of events lately," she said. "The cleaning bills will kill you."

The Klan passed out seven hundred and fifty flyers and claimed ten new members. For a month, the literature roadblock because a Sunday ritual in Elkton and Guthrie. It drove some blacks indoors and disgusted many whites, who, like the vast majority of Southerners, regard the Klan as a boofoonish group beloved of TV cameras but no longer a terrifying force. Klanwatch, an Alabama-based group that monitors racist organizations, estimates active Klan membership at about fifty-five hundred nationwide - half of what it was in the early nineteen-eighties and down from forty-two thousand in 1965. However, white-supremacist groups whose beliefs often overlap with the Klan's, such as the Aryan Nation and some parts of the militia movement, are growing, and Klan-watch estimates that since 1990 the overall number of white supremacists has increased from twenty-two thousand to twenty-five thousand.

What moderation in Todd County genuinely feared was the way extremists of all kinds were using Westerman's murder to inflame and divide their community racial peace. At an Elkton restaurant, one prominent businessperson told me, "There's an element out there, not in what I'd call the mainstream, that's making a hero out of someone who shouldn't be, and stirring up feelings that were best left in the closet." During six visits to Todd County, I often heard similar laments from merchants, ministers, teachers, and town officials. But they refused to speak out publicly.

The writer and historian Shelby Foote later explained this reticence by citing a historic parallel. Like many Southerners, he feels that vilification of the Confederate battle flag is historically misplaced, for the flag was designed as a combat standard and was revered by veterans as a symbol of valor and sacrifice, not of slavery. But Foote blames "right-minded" Southerners for the flag's fall into "shame and disgrace." When segregationists in this century seized the banner as a symbol of resistance to civil rights, "responsible people of the South" stood silently by - out of fear, Foote says, or out of secret sympathy with the racists. The same dynamic now seemed to be at work in the hushed homes and offices of southern Kentucky.

Zealots, meanwhile, were only too happy to fill the void. Soon after Westerman's death, Frances Chapman, a retired nurse who wears oversized glasses and electric-green pants suits, declared on local radio, "Slavery was not all that bad." Her comments came as part of a rabid defense of the Todd Central mascot. A school-board subcommittee meeting the week before Westerman's death had recommended that the rebel mascots and their flags be abandoned to help overcome "barriers to education." When news of the recommendation leaked out, a few days after Westerman's death, many whites became enraged. As they saw it, Westerman's shooting and the attack on the mascot by local "elites" meeting behind closed doors were of a piece, part of a campaign to elevate blacks at the expense of whites. "Don't put *us* where *they* used to be," Chapman told me, and went on to say that if whites surrendered the flag to blacks, "it'll just be a matter of time before they want something else."

So Chapman began circulating a petition threatening nonpayment of taxes to the school system if the mascot changed. Then, three weeks after Westerman's funeral, she and hundreds of other whites, including Hannah Westerman and her parents, packed a school-board meeting. Many wore kepis, battle-flag bandannas, and T-shirts that Chapman had had printed for the occasion; they pictured the flag with the words, "Show Respect - You're in Rebel Country."

Speakers were permitted to talk for three minutes each. One of the first was an elderly woman who said of her late husband, "He was a Yankee, and I converted him to a rebel and I'm damned proud of it!" She threw open her sweater to expose her "Show Respect" T-shirt, and the crowd roared.

Another woman jabbed her finger at the school board and yelled, "Listen to us - we put you there!" She told how her son at Todd Central had been forced to turn a rebel-flag T-shirt inside out to avoid provoking a fight during the week after Westerman's death. (Metal detectors had also been used at the school.) "Sure ain't right!" she shouted, and the crowd began stamping its feet and chanting "Discrimination! Discrimination!"

Frances Chapman waved her petition, which now bore three thousand names - almost a quarter of the country's population - and shouted, "Don't ever count us out!" It struck me that the media attention lavished on "angry white males" neglected the considerable depth of female rage on display here, and at other gatherings in Todd county. It also became clear that the wrath exhibited at the school meeting had little to do with the flag's historic or regional symbolism. The banner seemed to have floated free from time and place and become a generalized expression of fury against blacks, school officials, authority in general-anyone or anything that could shoulder some blame for these people's difficult lives.

The handful of blacks at the meeting were stunned into silence. "They're gone loco on us," Kim Gardner, the black Todd Central grad, later told me. Before Michael Westerman's death, she went on, "I felt like they respected us." Now she feared she'd been wrong all her life. "That flag opens up a racial door we've been keeping closed for so many years," she said. "It's a way of saying that white people have kept bottled up."

White parents pulled more than sixty kids - or almost one of every nine students - out of Todd Central and schooled them at home instead. In the spring, school officials quietly shelved the recommendation to phase out the flag and the rebel mascots. On learning of that decision, Frances Chapman declared, "I feel like it's a victory not only for Kentucky but for the entire South."

Scouts from across the entire South, in fact, had long since reconnoitered Todd county, and self-styled "Southern-heritage" or "Southern-nationalist" groups quickly began exploiting Westerman's murder. These groups, which preach the gospel of states' rights, regional pride, and reverence for the Confederacy, have flourished over the past five years, sparked in large part by attacks on the rebel flag and other Old South symbols.

Heritage groups vigorously condemn the Klan, which they feel has tarred anyone who supports the rebel flag as a hate-mongering bigot. Because of this disavowal, and also because they are nonviolent, heritage groups attack little of the scrutiny focused on the Klan, neo-Nazis, and racists it repudiates.

Like the states of the former Confederacy, heritage groups belong to a decentralized and often fractious coalition. The largest and oldest heritage group is the Sons of Confederate Veterans, or S.C.V.; it has more than twenty thousand members in hundreds of local "camps" that range from rabidly political cells to bookish history clubs. The S.C.V. has been joined in recent years, and sometimes challenged, by more aggressive organizations, and the movement as a whole has become sophisticated in spreading its message. Groups communicate not only through meetings and newsletters but on radio broadcasts, on Web pages with names like DixieNet, in Internet chat groups, and through 800-number hot lines that collect "heritage violations" (usually alleged insults to the flag by schools, corporations, cities, or TV shows). The Atlanta-based Heritage Preservation Association has recruited attorneys for a "legal-action network" that mimics the N.A.A.C.P.'s Legal Defense Fund, and the movement also frequently appropriates the vocabulary of victimology, depicting Southern whites as a minority subject to discrimination, and even "ethnic cleaning," by a tyrannical majority.

Some groups, like the newly formed Southern League, based in Tuscaloosa, Alabama, are headed largely by academics whose views have been aired in the *Washington Post* and other mainstream publications. The president of the Southern League, which has about three thousand members, is Michael Hill, a forty-four-year-old history professor at Stillman College, in Tuscaloosa; he calls the Southern League "paleoconservative," and declares, "If the current regime continues its tyranny, we shall not hesitate to advocate secession and self-rule for the Southern states." While the Southern League and others often echo the Agrarians of the nineteen-thirties - a group of intellectuals, including Robert Penn Warren, who felt the South's traditional culture was threatened by urban-industrial society - today's heritage groups have tailored their message to more modern and global anxieties. "The South represents the only remaining stumbling block to the imposition of an American police state," Hill proclaimed at a rally in Todd County. This state, he added, would plunge America into a "new world order" marked by a "godless" and mongrelized multiculturalism.

Heritage groups are active players in state politics, sometimes staging demonstrations in support of flying the rebel flag at capitols, as well as launching letter-writing and phone campaigns. The Heritage Preservation Association has a political-active committee to lobby legislators and endorse candidates, including Pat Buchanan for President. The Confederate Society of America has also endorsed Buchanan and solicits funds for his campaign in its newsletter. In a letter, Buchanan asked for the group's help, stating that Southern soldiers "didn't march into those guns in defense of slavery," and pledging, "I will defend our Southern culture in the White House." Buchanan, who has several Confederate ancestors, often sounds Southern-nationalist themes on the stump. In a recent debate in South Carolina, he defended the rebel flag on that state's capitol, calling it "a symbol of defiance, courage, bravery, and added, "Everyone should stand up for their heritage."

Like Buchanan, leaders of the heritage movement often are middle-class galvanize working-class whites, many of whom feel that their fortunes have been eroding for decades. "This is a group that has really lost it in the space of a generation," John Shelton Reed, a sociologist at the University of North Carolina, Chapel Hill, says. Part of what has been lost is economic status and political clout, Reed says, but the deepest grievances are cultural. "They feel that they don't get any respect, that their culture doesn't get any respect, and that their ancestors are being dissed."

Both white and black groups have found an endlessly renewable resource in the rebel flag. "It's a great issue for partisans on both sides to rally people around," Reed says. "There's no easy way to split the difference, and I don't know that anyone wants to. Either it's the school flag or not, the state flag or not. And whether you win or lose, it keeps you in the public eye."

Some members of the Sons of Confederate Veterans got in touch with the Westerman family immediately after Michael's death to offer their support, including the raising of funds for Hannah and the twins. Solicitations for the Michael Westerman Fund began appearing in newsletters and magazines published by the S.C.V. and other groups. (The national office of the S.C.V., however, kept in distance from the Westerman drama).

Westerman's biography began to undergo a metamorphosis. Heritage groups and some family members now claimed that he'd studied his genealogy closely and planned to join the S.C.V., and a Kentucky camp inducted him posthumously. And, according to official lore, Michael and Hannah had first met on a school trip to Fort Donelson, a Civil War battle site.

Most striking of all was Westerman's grave. A granite headstone, which Hannah had helped design, bore an image of Westerman's pickup and rebel flag. The S.C.V. arranged for the site to be decorated with an iron cross identical to the crosses marking graves of actual Confederate veterans, with "C.S.A." on one side and the Confederate motto,

"Deo Vindice," and 1861-1865" on the other.

Westerman's new Confederate profile appeared to comfort his relatives, providing a larger meaning to what had seemed a senseless death. Letters poured in from people across the country who wanted to express their sympathy and their support for the flag. The Klan also sent its condolences, even offering help in writing thank-you notes. "We always heard the Klan were devils," Hannah's father, Billy Laster, said, "But they seemed like nice, Christian people to me."

Neither the family nor the heritage groups wanted the Klan to distract attention from a major memorial they had planned for Washington on March 4, 1995, which was Confederate Flag Day. The Klan more or less obliged, by staging a literature roadblock in robes and hoods but removing those garments before joining others beside Westerman's grave. The Aryan Nation also politely called ahead and agreed to leave its literature at home. A few skinheads showed up but kept a respectful distance from a four-hundred-car northern Tennessee to Guthrie's cemetery.

At the grave site, men in Confederate uniforms unfurled a rebel flag embroidered with the words "Michael Westerman Martyr" and fired muskets in salute. Women dressed as Confederate mourners wept. Then the event's main organizer, an S.C.V. "commander" named William Rolan, eulogized Westerman for joining "the Confederate dead under the same honorable circumstances" as those who fell in battle.

The convoy wound across the county to the Jefferson Davis memorial, where family members stood before the monument and shared new details about Westerman's life. His aunt Brenda Arms said that his "main interests involved relatives that fought during the Civil War and Vietnam." His father said that his son died because of his "beliefs and his constitutional rights." Then speakers from across the South strode up the steps, and the memorial became a political rally. An official of the Heritage Presentation Association ripped into the N.A.A.C.P., Queer Nation, and "the goose-stepping storm troopers of the political-correctness movement." Jared Taylor, a writer on race relations who edits a newsletter called *American Renaissance*, cited statistics about black-on-white crime: "Any given black person is about seventeen times more likely to kill a white person than the other way around." He listed brutal black-on-white murders, rhetorically asking the crowd each time, "Are we to remain silent?" Some in the crowd chanted, "It's time for revenge!"

Michael Hill, of the Southern League, linked Westerman's murder to the F.B.I. actions against the Branch Davidians in Waco, Texas, and against the white separatist Randy Weaver at Ruby Ridge, Idaho. He said that the message of all these incidents was "It is open season on anyone who has the audacity to question the dictates of an all-powerful federal government or the illicit rights bestowed on a compliant and deadly underclass that now fulfills a role similar to that of Hitler's brown-shirted street thugs in the nineteen-thirties." This was a long way from the Confederacy, but, then, the speeches weren't really about the South, and Westerman had metamorphosed again, from a Confederate martyr into a front-line soldier in a contemporary culture war.

As William Rolan later explained to me, at his home, in Mississippi, "It's clearly an intellectual war, a war of ideas, a cold war." Rolan, who broadcasts a show called "Radio Free Dixie" and publishes the newspaper (billed as "pro-South, pro-secession, race conscious"), said that Westerman's killing had become "a lighter rod" because it was "an unnecessary sacrifice of an all-American kid trying to bring up a family and murdered by kids raised under the welfare state." The flag he added, was a sort of talisman against the mainstream culture, "a symbol of common identity among southerners in an age when so much of what we are comes from TV or Hollywood or Madison Avenue."

Westerman's aunt Brenda, who had become the family's point person for Rolan and the other rally organizers, was disturbed by some of the speeches that day, and was worried that Michael's memory was being used to air extremist views. She was also alarmed by the literature turning up in her mail. "Some of this stuff is just a little wild," she said when I visited her at her home, opening a trunk stuffed with flyers and newspapers from neo-Nazi and white-supremacist groups. They included a viciously xenophobic tabloid, *The Truth at Last*, which recently published an article condemning Senator Phil Gramm's marriage to an "Asiatic" - an article that the Gramm campaign alleged Buchanan backers had distributed just before the Louisiana caucuses. (The Buchanan campaign had denied distributing the article).

Brenda slipped a video of the Flag Day rally into her VCR and listened to the speeches again. Midway through the tape, she began weeping. "I feel my grandchildren will see another civil war," she said. "Between black and white, not North and South. People just can't seem to get along."

The trial of Westerman's assailants was originally scheduled for early summer. But Freddie Morrow's mother found that she could no longer pay the private lawyer she'd hired, and a public defender took over, delaying the case. A judge had acceded to a request by the prosecutors that the defendants be tried as adults, on a stiff list of charges: premeditated murder, felony murder, attempted aggravated kidnapping, and civil-rights intimidation.

Robertson County, Tennessee, where the shooting occurred, lacks a juvenile facility, so Morrow ended up in solitary confinement in a county jail - a overcrowded pen under court order to improve its poor facilities. The jail's only exercise space is a rooftop enclosed by a high fence topped with razor wire. When I first visited, a dozen inmates began rattling their rooftop cage and hollering as I made my way across the parking lot.

"Hey, snow! What's your name?"

"You coming to see Freddie?"

"They gonna fry that little dude?"

A guard escorted me to a converted cell that served as the prison library. Then he brought Morrow in. Clad in orange prison pants and a white T-shirt, Morrow stood a lanky-five feet ten, and had a disarming, chip-toothed smile above a teenager's wispy goatee, which he fingered self-consciously. We sat knee to knee in the cramped cell and made small talk until I asked him what he was reading. He suddenly became animated, and talked about "Makes Me Wanna Holler," the best-selling memoir by the black journalist Nathan McCall, and Richard Wright's "Native Son," with whose protagonist, Bigger Thomas, Morrow said he identified.

When I asked why, he told me about his own troubled upbringing in Chicago. The story unspooled in a tangled rush of images: rough schools, reefer parties, Gangsters Disciples, a girl he may have got pregnant, arrests for gun possession and curfew violation. Coming to Guthrie was a relief after that, Morrow said. But he found it hard to shed his troubled youth up North. The way he told it, the Chicago street culture he'd escaped was exactly what young Southern blacks craved. "Being in gangs, that's the main thing they want - they want to be bad," he said. "They came to me and asked about gangs - gang colors, stealing cars, crazy stuff."

Morrow began acting out the role of street-savvy tough. His recounting of frequent brawls always followed the same pattern: Someone would provoke him, he'd walk away, then a taunt or internal prompt would lead, inevitably, to a fight. A fatalistic phrase kept recurring: "Go on ahead." As in, "He picked up a bottle and broke it and was talking about putting it in my back, and I was like 'Go on ahead, just go on ahead.'"

It was during one of Morrow's many suspensions from school that he shot Westerman. He said he had nightmares about that day, and as we talked about them he began to cry. "No matter what I do - ever since I turned myself in, I've been saying 'Sorry.' But that just ain't gonna do." One night after he'd spent several months in solitary, he tore up a sheet intending to hang himself. "Something just kept telling me, 'Just go on ahead and do it, just go on ahead.'" But a prison guard and former preacher helped Morrow work through it. Now he was making plans for the future. He'd thought of writing about his life, he said, and taking up drawing again - a hobby he'd excelled at up North. He also fantasized about his release from jail, which he described as if it were imminent. "My main plan for when I get out is to be back in touch with my family, go to church every Sunday," he said. And he wanted to stay in Guthrie - nothing fancy, just settle down with his girl and go to work at an appliance factory. "I was thinking when I turn eighteen I can get on at State Stove with my cousin Jeff," he said.

The trial finally began on January 9th, in Springfield, the seat of Robertson County, almost on the anniversary of the shooting. About a hundred people crowded into the courthouse - a Victorian throwback, with glass globes dispensing gum for a penny, and with clouds of cigarette smoke hanging in the air.

In the courtroom, Westerman's family, wearing his picture pinned to their breasts, filled the front row. Behind them sat several members of the S.C.V. and a publisher of Southern books who during recess peddled copies of an old Confederate apologia called "Facts the Historians Leave Out." Two Klansmen were allowed into the courtroom, in street clothes. Across the gallery sat a much smaller group of blacks. Conspicuous among them was Freddie Morrow's mother, Cynthia Batie, who had come from Chicago by Greyhound. Afflicted with a crippling neurological ailment, she rode into the courtroom in a motorized cart.

The defense had sought a change of venue, because of local publicity and Springfield's proximity to Guthrie. And, indeed, the jury pool proved so over-whelmingly white and pro-prosecution that the defense chose at the last moment to waive a jury trial. The judge, Robert Wedemeyer, moved the trial along quickly. It was over in three and a half days.

The trial hinged on intent - "a head case," as Morrow's lawyer put it. Prosecutors had two routes to a first-degree murder conviction. One was to demonstrate that the shooting was deliberate and premeditated, and the other was to show that the killing occurred during an attempted kidnapping, which made it felony murder. If either charge was proved, the punishment was a mandatory life sentence. Another charge, civil rights intimidation, was based on a new Tennessee law, designed to prevent harassment of blacks; its use in reference to a white and to the rebel flag was unprecedented.

From the start, the case displayed a central irony: the rebel flag that had been featured in so many media reports was conspicuous by its absence during most of the trial. The defense feared that dwelling on the flag and its potential as a provocative symbol - or even painting the tense racial atmosphere in Todd County, particularly on the weekend of the crime - would bolster the state's claim that the killing was premeditated and would also incriminate the defendants on the civil-rights charge. And, because the recent O.J. Simpson verdict had outraged many whites in rural Tennessee, the defense, anticipating a jury trial, had decided against emphasizing race.

But this decision had left the defense lawyers with an anemic explanation of what happened. In folksy opening statements, they likened the incident to their own schoolyard brawls in the nineteen sixties. The only reason that this one had spiralled tragically out of control, they suggested, was that kids now wielded guns instead of fists, and one of them had taken a fluke shot. Later, their clients, on the stand, shrugged off Westerman's rebel flag - and even being called "nigger" - as commonplaces of the local landscape. It was left, oddly, to the prosecution to point out the flag's potential as a racist symbol.

The Simpson trial warped the case in another way as well, at least for the families. It had raised wild hopes among the defendants' relatives - and fearing among Westerman's - that lawyers could exploit the local police work in the same way that Johnnie Cochran had shredded the Los Angeles Police Department's. The police did not do any ballistics tests on Westerman's gun. Nor had they performed gunshot-residue tests on his truck, on Damien Darden's car, or on any of the defendants. Moreover, the coroner who had signed Westerman's autopsy report was unavailable: he had since fled Tennessee amid allegations of incompetence and necrophilia.

But the defense attorneys - an overworked pro bono - didn't have resources of the sort available to the Simpson dream team. And, to some degree, any holes in the investigation were mot. Unlike Simpson, the defendants had made incriminating statements to the police on the night of the shooting - before any of them had lawyers or knew that Westerman's wound was fatal. Also, the state had two potent witnesses: Hannah Westerman and one of the passengers in Darden's car - Tony Andrews, who turned state's evidence.

Andrews, a childhood neighbor and playmate of Westerman's identified Darden as the instigator of the confrontation and Morrow as a willing triggerman, but he also said he saw someone in the truck reach out and shake the flag at Janie's Market just as Darden was breaking off plans to fight. This action, combined with Morrow's telling the others he'd heard someone shout "Nigger," appeared to reignite the teen-agers' desire to fight.

Andrew's testimony clearly upset the families in the gallery. During a break, Freddie Morrow's mother left the chamber to find Westerman's family standing just on the other side of the door. David Westerman seemed to block her path. And Hannah, arms crossed, fixed Cynthia Batie with a flinty-eyed scowl.

"What's your problem?" Batie snapped.

"Bitch," Hannah said.

"What did you say?"

"You heard me, bitch."

"I'm not a bitch."

Hannah's family pulled her away as Batie yelled, "The truth is going to come out! then we'll see who the bitch is!" The two camps huddled chain-smoking, and muttered about the incident, each giving vent to vicious stereotypes. In Cynthia Batie's mind, Hannah and the Westermans were bigoted rednecks, just as the imagined Westerman had been, and their friends were closet Klansmen. To the Westermans, Batie represented, in the words of Michael's mother, JoAnn, "the motormouth with a motor," and uppity city black who stirred things up, just the way her son had.

Inside the courtroom, Morrow took the stand. He said that he'd fired the gun because others had goaded him; even if that was true, it wasn't clear how the goading could diminish his guilt. Nor did he exhibit any of the emotion or remorse he had shown when I visited him in jail. Instead, numb with anxiety, he dully mumbled "Yessir" and "I don't know" as the state

asked one incriminating question after another. Watching from the gallery, the county's chief deputy whispered to a man beside him, "He started in a ditch about six inches deep with a shovel. Now he's in with a backhoe digging himself as deep a grave as he can."

Still, the defense remained confident that the charges would be reduced to manslaughter or even lower. The flag seemed almost an afterthought, Darden's lawyer, Jerome Converse, felt that Hannah Westerman had effectively thrown away the charge of civil-rights intimidation by testifying that Westerman displayed the flag because "it matched his truck and it made it look sharp," rather than as an expression of any belief. "Aesthetics are not protected by the Constitution," Converse observed in closing arguments.

This speech prompted an emotional reply from one of the prosecutors, an owlish Northerner named Arthur Bieber, who rushed to the podium carrying several tomes. The key issue, he said, was not the intent of the person displaying the flag but "stereotypical assumptions" made by those who saw it. "If a person feels it is symbolic of keeping African-Americans back, then it's easy to believe that the people displaying it are bigots." Whites in the audience began to shift uncomfortably. "They'd get mad," Bieber continued. "They might want to drag them out and beat them up. A stereotypical assumption was made in this case, and that's why nit happened."

Bieber opened William Shirer's "Rise and Fall of the Third Reich," and quoted Nazi laws about Jews as another example of "stereotypical assumptions" that led to violence. Then he turned to Carl Sandburg's biography of Abraham Lincoln. "I'll probably offend some people," he said of the Confederate Antichrist. He read the opening of the Gettysburg Address, lingering on the statement "All men are created equal," He cited the Lincoln quote, he told me later, because it buttressed the point that whites have the same right to fly the rebel flag that blacks have to wear "X" T-shirts.

While the Judge deliberated over the young men's fate, the families retreated to opposite ends of the hall, holding hands and praying. When court resumed, ninety minutes later, the chamber was filled with undercover police. There had been anonymous death threats against the Judge, and the cops were there also to prevent a post-decision brawl between what one lawyer called "bride side and groom side" in the court.

The Judge found Freddie Morrow guilty of attempted aggravated kidnapping, felony murder, and civil-rights intimidation. "By law," he said of the murder charge, "the court imposes sentence of imprisonment for life." Damien Darden received the same sentence. A third defendant, a sixteen-year-old, was found innocent.

The women in Westerman's family, except for Hannah, burst into tears. Hannah spoke out of the courtroom and into a pack of TV cameramen. "I feel everyone should have got what the two got," she said. "They got what they deserved - well, they deserved to die." (Tennessee has no death penalty for juveniles.) But she wasn't altogether displeased. "It's about time someone who's white got to stand up and say, 'Our civil rights were violated.'"

A few hours later, at a tavern in Guthrie, I watched Hannah on the six-o'clock news. The barmaid raised a beer bottle in salute, and everyone at the bar cheered. At Janie's Market, nearby, trucks pulled in to buy gas, rebel flags flying. Banners also appeared in windows along the main street.

The next day, I found two teen-age girls smoking and shivering beside Westerman's grave. They said that Todd Central high school was calm but that a chilly distance now separated blacks and whites. "No one wants to talk - we go our separate ways," Kristina Gore said, flicking ash on the snow. "It's probably for the best."

Black teen-agers felt much the same, and a growing number had decided to escape Todd County by joining the Army at the earliest opportunity. Their parents often chose to shop in nearby Clarksville now, rather than buy from local merchants, around whom they felt awkward. Some blacks avoided going out in Guthrie or Elkton after dark.

At a service in Guthrie's black Baptist church two days after the decision, the tone was resigned. Members of all the defendants' families were there, cooling themselves with cardboard fans that bore pictures of Martin Luther King, Jr. The pastor spoke of the trial in the broad context of black suffering. "We have been o-pressed and *de*-pressed for over two hundred years," he said. "Ain't nothing change but the years."

Morrow's mother invited me across the street to her in-laws' house, a small bungalow with a plastic snowman in the yard. She studied a picture of Freddie at the age of two, hugging a Teddy bear, and wondered aloud how her youngest child - "a mama's boy," she affectionately recalled - could now be facing life in prison. Perhaps, she said, it was all her own fault, for losing her job when Freddie was a young teen-ager; after that, she had lost the house she'd been trying to buy, and had moved to a rough area she described as New Jack City. It was there that Freddie first got into trouble.

Or maybe it was the fault of adolescent hormones, she went on. "Boys got this thing, showing your manhood, that you're bad," she said. "It's a man thing." But she was also angry that racism and the rebel flag hadn't really been aired at the trial. "The flag and 'nigger'-calling - you can deny that it hurts you, but it build up," she said. "You're going to burst one day. You keep putting it on people, it's going to blow up."

Ten minutes up the road, at the Westermans' house, in flat farm country north of Guthrie, fourteen rebel flags were on display to mark the anniversary of their son's death: one flew at half-mast from a tall flagpole; the others were draped across rocking chairs and porch furniture. Inside, Hannah sat in the den watching "Oprah" as the twins, Michael and Michaela, played on the floor. One wore a rebel-flag shirt bearing the words "American by Birth, Rebel by the Grace of God." The den, too, was cluttered with Confederate paraphernalia, mostly gifts from well-wishers across the South: stands with miniature flags; toy rebel soldiers; a picture of Jeff Davis, another of rebels in the field.

Westerman's mother joined us, and she echoed the students I'd spoken to at the grave site. "At Guthrie Garment, blacks I consider myself close to, deep down inside there's something in-between us now," JoAnn Westerman said. "We leave that void there and don't discuss it." I asked if whites might reach cross the void by refraining from displays of the rebel flag. "Back down?" she snapped. "Never back down to none of them."

I asked Hannah why, after hearing the court testimony, she thought Westerman's truck had been targeted. "Blacks don't like Western," she hypothesized, referring to Westerman's cowboy hat, which Tony Andrews said he'd spotted at Janie's. Or maybe they were just jealous. "It was a big ole mean-looking truck," she said proudly.

The truck's flag now adorned Hannah's living-room wall. Another rebel flag, which had draped Westerman's coffin, had been installed in a framed exhibit at a museum owned by members of the Sons of Confederate Veterans in Franklin, Tennessee, where the South took more than six thousand casualties in an 1862 assault even bloodier than Pickett's Charge. The exhibit included a photograph of Westerman and said that the "Confederate Martyr" had succumbed to his wound "after being accosted by a carload of black youths who made racist remarks concerning this flag." It hung in the foyer of the museum, beside a print of Pat Cleburne, the most famous of six Southern generals killed at Franklin. The S.C.V. had also helped raise about forty-five thousand dollars for Westerman's trust fund, which was to be reserved for the twins until they turned eighteen.

Westerman's father had drifted in and out of the den without saying much, but as I got up to leave he offered to show me a home video. Images of Michael rolled across the TV screen: as a baby, as a seventh grader on the football team, at home making a science-fair telegraph with his father, at the senior prom with Hannah, and, finally, cradling one of his twins. As we watched, one of the babies toddled up to the screen and said, "Dada." Mr. Westerman's eyes misted over. A modest, soft-spoken man, he was like Freddie Morrow's mother, still trying to make sense of what had happened to his son.

He opened a loose-leaf album his sister Brenda had given him for Christmas, a sort of family reliquary that included the program from their mother's funeral and pages of Westerman history. Mr. Westerman ran his fingers along a list of Confederate ancestors: one captured, another shot dead at Gettysburg, and a private "killed in action, 24th May 1862." His age was listed as nineteen. "Just like Michael," he said. He wiped his eyes. "They say that war ended a long time ago. But around here it's like it's still going on."