

**Pamphlet for Saving Willie McGee, 1951**

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| <b>TYPE:</b>  | Cartoon                 | <b>TOPICS:</b> | Law & Politics, Racial Discrimination |
| <b>TIME:</b>  | 1950-2000               |                |                                       |
| <b>LEVEL:</b> | Middle School and Above |                |                                       |



**HISTORICAL BACKGROUND**

The Civil Rights movement of the 1950s and 1960s was marked by major Supreme Court decisions and Federal legislation. But small steps along the way laid the foundation for these giant strides. Many northern liberals, including Bella Abzug, became important advocates for social justice.

In 1950, Abzug became involved in her first case as a civil rights lawyer. She defended Willie McGee, a black man from Mississippi who was sentenced to death for raping a white woman, even though he and the woman had been in a long-standing relationship. In his defense, Abzug challenged the traditional practice of excluding blacks from juries. She also argued that Southern judges' and juries' reservation of the death penalty in rape cases for blacks only constituted a violation of Constitutional safeguards against cruel and unusual punishment. The Supreme Court stayed the execution twice, but it refused to rule on the case.

The sketch reproduced here was used as a means to generate support for McGee, as well as to show the urgency of the case as his execution date approached once again. In the final few days, Abzug traveled to

Jackson, Mississippi, for a last-minute clemency hearing. Angry local whites had been threatening violence throughout the trials and appeals. When she arrived in town, Abzug found that no hotel would take her. Alone and pregnant, she spent the night awake in the locked bathroom stall of a bus station to avoid the Ku Klux Klan. The next day she argued before the Governor of Mississippi for six hours. Despite extensive publicity and protests organized by the Civil Rights Congress, McGee was executed in 1951.

For more on the political and judicial activism of Bella Abzug, go to JWA's *Women of Valor* exhibit at <http://www.jwa.org/exhibits/wov/abzug/>.

**DISCUSSION QUESTIONS**

1. Describe the man in the picture. Why do you think he is dressed as he is?
2. What is ordinary about the chair? What is unusual about it?
3. What does the hand on the calendar represent?