National register marker honors civil rights leader

BY OLIVIA MCCLURE
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In Bogalusa, a mill town once ruled by white law enforcement and saturated with the Ku Klux Klan — often one and the same during the 1960s — a National Register of Historic Places marker now stands in front of a modest, aging gray house. There, in 1965, Robert “Bob” Hicks rallied African-Americans to take up the fight for integration and civil rights.

Hicks’ home, a Klan target at the time, was guarded night and day by the Deacons for Defense and Justice, an organization that remains a little-remembered slice of Louisiana history.

Armed Deacons units quietly sprang up throughout the region, protecting civil rights activists and Northern organizers during the tumultuous decade, while raising alarm in the highest circles of power.

The Deacons began in 1964 and all but faded from the scene by the end of the decade. The historic marker recognizes Hicks as a founder of the Bogalusa Deacons, who had chapters in Jonesboro, Ferriday and Natchez, defied the national nonviolent civil rights agenda by arming themselves. Martin Luther King Jr. declined to visit areas where the Deacons were active and visible.

But the Deacons’ brand of activism thwarted most Klan attacks in Bogalusa — a blue-collar paper mill town that earned the title of “Klantown, USA” in a 1965 article in The Nation magazine — and other places in Louisiana and southern Mississippi. While shots were frequently exchanged between the Deacons and Klan groups, there is no record of anyone dying.

Klansmen threatened to bomb Hicks’ house in February 1965 when he allowed two young white Congress of Racial Equality, or CORE, workers to stay the night. Both of the Hickses were at the front of a 10-day, 100-mile march from Bogalusa to the Capitol in Baton Rouge in 1967. Federalized National Guard troops were required to get the marchers through Livingston Parish, where there were violent confrontations in Satsuma and Denham Springs.

The historical marker is dedicated to Robert “Bob” Hicks, a worker at the once-segregated Crown Zellerbach paper mill and headed the local Voters League. He died in 2010 at the age of 88.

On Saturday, his widow, Valeria “Jackie” Hicks, led a group of family, friends, community leaders and well-wishers on a four-block march from Bogalusa’s Bethlehem Baptist Church to the home, where the marker was unveiled.

State Sen. Ben Nevers, D-Bogalusa, left; Jackie Hicks with her granddaughter, center; and Elder Christopher Matthews, of Bethlehem Baptist Church of Bogalusa, walk during a march commemorating 1960s civil rights leader Robert Hicks.

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“It was fine with us, but the white people didn’t like it,” Jackie Hicks, 85, said. “When they said they were going to bomb the house, we start calling friends to come in. ... We asked the police for protection, and they said that they would not come.”

Armed Deacons poured into the house, ready to protect the workers and the Hicks family from Klansmen and Klan-sympathizing police officers.

“One of the (CORE workers) was 18 years old,” Hicks recalled. “They killed those kids in Philadelphia, Mississippi, and that was one reason why we wouldn’t let them kill those guys.”

Bob Hicks started a movement by opening his doors that night, said former CORE field secretary Ronnie Moore, 74, of New Orleans. Moore had worked in Jonesboro, where the first Deacons chapter started, and was in Bogalusa to organize a CORE project.

Decades later, marching down a street named for Hicks, people sang a spiritual — the lyrics of which the Deacons took literally: “Time is winding up. So much corruption in this land.”
Why don't people take a stand?

The Deacons were unofficial protectors of the black community, Jackie Hicks recalled. "If you were black, you couldn't walk the streets," she said. "If a group of whites saw you, they would jump on you. But if the Deacons were around, they wouldn't mess with you."

They didn't stop in Bogalusa, however. Tommy Brumfield, who was only a teenager when he became a "foot soldier" in the Deacons, took part in the 1967 march to Baton Rouge. Brumfield recalled the group's run-ins with KKK members during their journey, especially in Livingston Parish.

Klansmen "put logs and things across the road and they attacked us," Jackie Hicks said. The Washington Parish marchers made it to the steps of the State Capitol, where National Guard soldiers and Louisiana state troopers guarded them as they rallied.

Back home in 1971, Bob Hicks filed a lawsuit against Crown Zellerbach, which would not allow black workers to hold management positions despite the Civil Rights Act of 1964. Hicks won and became the mill's first black supervisor.

The marker now in front of his house is co-sponsored by International Paper, which took over Crown Zellerbach.

Much has changed in Bogalusa since the 1960s, said state Sen. Ben Nevers, D-Bogalusa, who on Saturday marched next to Jackie Hicks and carried a sign listing dates that key civil rights laws were passed.

Nevers grew up on the white side of town. "Nobody told me to go to the back of the bus, or that I couldn't drink out of that water fountain, or that I couldn't vote," he said.

People must learn about the town's past, although dark, to solve current problems, he added.

"I hope and I wish that what we're doing today inspires the young people," said Barbara Hicks Collins, Bob and Jackie Hicks' daughter.

After Jackie Hicks pulled off the cloth covering the marker, she smiled. "That's my husband," she said, pointing to the photo on the metal sign. "I am so happy that one man could bring this many people together."

This story is from the LSU Manship News Service. Reporter Renee Barrow contributed to the article.