

Florida's Legacy Of Racial Hatred

By **SUSAN CAROL MCCARTHY**

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I read with interest your coverage of Attorney General Charlie Crist's announcement that the investigation into the murder of Harry T. Moore and his wife, Harriette, has ended, four Klansmen from the Apopka/Winter Garden area were identified, and the case is officially closed.

While I rejoice in the emotional closure that this announcement brings their daughter and my friend, Evangeline Moore, I hope that you and your colleagues in the Florida press will not stop short of addressing the bigger, harder questions.

The men who killed the Moores and the others who encouraged or officially ignored their efforts are apparently long gone. But what is their legacy?

What was the message communicated to Klansmen in my hometown of Apopka and across the state when the 1952-53 indictments brought against them were quashed? When none of the many crimes they confessed to - about which the grand jury's March 1953 report complained, "Details grow monotonous through sheer repetition" - were ever prosecuted?

The Christmas night murder of the Moores was the culmination of a year of outrageous Klan activity that Northern newspapers dubbed "the Florida terror." Where did all the prejudice go after motivating the March '51 murder of black citrus picker Melvin Womack in the Apopka-Winter Garden area, the November '51 shooting of the two black prisoners in the Lake County sheriff's care, the dozen bombings that year throughout Central and South Florida?

The answer is perhaps a triumph of the board of tourism over the truth. Back in the '50s, Florida resisted an honest confrontation with its race troubles. In a state where people come in droves to forget their troubles, open acknowledgement of such problems was deemed bad for business. The records were sealed for 40 years. The Moores, who rightfully deserve acknowledgement as America's first civil rights martyrs, were condemned to anonymity. But what about now? Will our need to entertain the tourists once again trump the truth?

Please, go back. Dig into the Tuskegee Institute's records of the lynching years, 1882-1930. Discover the truth: Florida had by far the highest ratio of lynchings to black population - 40 percent higher than Mississippi's, which had the most victims, nearly twice Georgia's and 10 times higher than North Carolina's.

While you're back there searching those records, try to find a state comparable to Florida, which during the '20s managed to lose not one but two entire black communities (Rosewood and Ocoee) to white mob violence.

Now, fast-forward to the two most easily accessed current statistical markers of the state of hate:

Spend some time on www.fbi.gov perusing annual reports of recorded hate crimes. Among the nine Deep

South states in 2001, 2002, 2003 and 2004, Florida had by far the most.

Now, head over to the Web site of the Southern Poverty Law Center (<http://www.splcenter.org/intel/map/hate.jsp>), which tracks active hate groups by state. You'll find, as Jim Stratton reported for the Orlando Sentinel in January, that in 2004, that Florida was second in the nation in number of hate groups and that "since 1997, the state has finished first or second six times in the center's annual reports on extremist groups." The 2005 statistics are out, and we've stretched that streak to seven.

The Moore case may be closed, but the measurable hate in the state remains appalling.

Susan Carol McCarthy is a Florida native and author of a historical novel about Florida's turbulent early '50s, "Lay That Trumpet In Our Hands."