

Legacy lives on

Memories of civil rights movement's 1st martyrs preserved at replica home

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Gift boxes sit unopened at the foot of a tree adorned with ornaments and lights. Baskets of pine cones and ribbon top the piano and coffee table. Decorated for the holiday, the scene inside a replica of Harry and Harriette Moore's Mims home is a snapshot of what it looked like when the couple went to sleep on Christmas night in 1951.



They were shocked awake when a bomb hidden under their house was detonated 70 years ago this week. Harry Moore was dead within hours. Harriette Moore lived another nine days. FBI agents who investigated shortly after the bombing found a two-foot crater beneath the Moores' bedroom floor and wrote that the house "looked like a cyclone hit it."

The bombing is evidence that Florida — though often disassociated with the most brutal portrayals of the Jim Crow South — played a more significant role in Black Americans' fight for civil rights than is often acknowledged, said Randolph Bracy, a Bethune-Cookman University professor.

"I am convinced that the Civil Rights Movement ... started in Central Florida in 1951 with the assassination of Harry and Harriette Moore," he said, an assertion he acknowledged is provocative, as most scholars mark the movement's start as the *Brown v. Board of Education* decision three years later that found segregation in public schools unconstitutional.

The Moores were the movement's first martyrs, he said.

Though their names are not as widely known as others who lived and died in the fight for equality for Black people in the United States in the 1950s and 60s, Harry Moore predated all of them. Supported by his wife, he spent nearly two decades registering Black voters, demanding equal pay for Black teachers, leading an anti-lynching campaign and growing the NAACP's membership in small towns across Florida.

“The night that Harry and Harriett Moore were killed, Medgar Evers was literally on his honeymoon in Mississippi and would not even join the NAACP until the next year,” said Ben Green, who wrote the first detailed account of the Moores’ lives in a 1999 book. “Malcolm X was in prison in Boston and Martin Luther King was a religion doctoral student at Boston University . . . This is not to take anything from those three but only to say, [Harry Moore] was before his time.

“He was doing this before the country was paying attention and he’s the one that got forgotten.”

Martyrs’ survivors struggled to grieve

On the land where the Moores once lived in Brevard County, acres of orange groves have been replaced by the Harry T. & Harriette V. Moore Cultural Complex, which includes the replica home, a museum and a walking Civil Rights trail. A handful of stubborn orange trees that sprung up again after the groves were cleared line the path from the house to the museum. Though decades have passed since the fatal bombing, visitors often tell Cultural Complex Leader Carshonda Wright they can still smell the charred ruins of the house.

“Your senses might trick you out here and make you think you smell burning wood,” she said. Annie Moore, the Moores’ oldest daughter, was in another room in the house the night of the bombing and was not seriously injured. Her younger sister, Evangeline Moore, a daddy’s girl, was in Washington

D.C. where she lived and worked. She didn’t learn of the bombing until she reached Florida the day after Christmas.

Before their father’s funeral, the sisters made a pact: They would never show the pain the attack on their family caused.

“The problem with that is, if you do not properly grieve, it can cause you all kinds of problems,” said Skip Pagan, Evangeline Moore’s son.

Her grief was so great that, for decades, Evangeline could not talk about it, even to her son. Pagan said he didn’t know the full story of what his grandparents accomplished and how they died until — at 45 — he read Green’s book, “Before His Time: The Untold Story Of Harry T. Moore, America’s First Civil Rights Martyr.”

Instead of describing the horror of his death, Evangeline Moore told her son stories of what her father was like as a man, not a civil rights icon.

“What I knew most of was the family dynamics,” Pagan said. “I knew my grandfather and grandmother were educators. I knew that he was the principal. I heard how my grandfather was a quiet man. I understood that he was a lover of jazz and the blues and gospel. I knew that my grandfather loved Westerns and they would go to Daytona, which was the only Black theater in the general area, to go to the movies. I think they had to sit in the balcony but at least they could go . . .

“I knew a lot about the family dynamics. I just didn’t know the extent of the work that they did until my later years.”

‘Most hated Black man in Florida’

Harry Moore started a chapter of the NAACP in Brevard County in 1934. Three years later, with the help of civil rights attorney and future Supreme Court Justice Thurgood Marshall, Moore, who was a teacher and school principal, filed a fair pay lawsuit to demand Black and white teachers be compensated equally.

Though the lawsuit eventually lost, Moore's efforts paved the way for others to follow and eventually win fair pay for teachers.

When a 1944 court decision outlawed white-only primary elections, Moore started registering Black voters, encouraging them to vote in the primaries, where elections were generally decided in Florida. Under his leadership of the Progressive Voters' League, more than 116,000 new Black voters were added.

As he registered voters, he traveled the state helping to create more than 60 more NAACP branches and investigating lynchings. In some cases, Moore conducted his own interviews and collected statements from families of lynching victims.

Among those invested in keeping white supremacy in place, Moore "was the most hated Black man in Florida because of his civil engagement at a time when Black people were afraid to look white people in the eye," said Sonya Mallard, coordinator for the Mims cultural complex. "He could have minded his business but he took on the problems of all Black folks."

Weeks before his death, Moore confronted the now-infamous Lake County Sheriff Willis McCall and demanded he be indicted for

shooting and killing Samuel Shephard, one of the Black men at the center of the Groveland Four case. Shephard and three others were falsely accused of raping a white woman. They were finally exonerated last month.

The exact reason Moore was targeted for assassination is unknown but many blame this confrontation. Wright, however, said his other civil rights activism is more likely.

"I personally think they started wanting to kill him when he registered all those people to vote," she said.

Robert Cassanello, a history professor at the University of Central Florida, also pointed to the political power Moore brought to Black Floridians.

"If you think about it, the Groveland defendants were in a southern white supremacist judicial justice system," he said. "Their fates were secure. If you're a white supremacist during that time, I don't know that you fretted an all-white jury in the state of Florida was going to acquit those three young men."

Black voters, however, had the power to sway elections and change the political leanings of the South. That, he said, was reason enough to kill at a time when local chapters of the Ku Klux Klan used violence to strike fear across Central Florida.

News of the Moores' deaths spread around the world in the months that followed the bombing but the FBI investigation did not lead to any arrests. Neither did several other investigations that followed.

In 2004, then-Florida Attorney General Charlie Crist asked for the case to be re-opened. Relying mostly on old FBI documents and evidence, the 20-month investigation ended with four names: Earl J. Brooklyn, Tillman H. Belvin, Joseph N. Cox and Edward L. Spivey, all believed to be members of the Ku Klux Klan's Apopka Klavern and all long dead.

When the names were announced in 2006, Green, who by then had spent more than a decade researching and writing about the Moores, immediately started to speak out, casting doubt on the findings. He said the FBI had already proven the four men could not have committed the crime.

"I think their conclusion was a complete joke," he said. "They have nothing on those four guys . . . I was screaming: 'Not those guys!' It was like they just pulled names out of a hat."

But Crist, now a Democratic U.S. representative in Pinellas County, said Green's criticism is wrong. Crist, a former governor currently running to retake that post, launched the 2004 investigation around the same time as his initial bid for the job.

Nearly two decades since he relaunched the investigation, he said he is confident the right people were named. If any of them had been alive when the investigation closed, he said he could have successfully charged and convicted them "or we wouldn't have named them." Pagan, now 68, said after decades of watching his mother be driven to illness by grief, he had to make peace with knowing that no one will ever be held responsible for his grandparents' deaths.

"I spend my energy in the marvel of the dedication of his work," said Pagan, who believes his grandfather must have known he could be killed for his civil rights work. "To me, I've always appreciated the greatness because there are very few people in this world that will ever, for their cause, know they're going to lose their life and still think, 'You know what, it's worth it.' "

Pagan's son, Darren Pagan, learned of his great grandparents' deaths much younger. He was in elementary school when his father and grandmother told him about what happened to them.

Now 29, he has spent most of his life knowing there are still doubts about who committed the crime and watching his grandmother try, often unsuccessfully, to share the story of her parents.

Like his father, he does not expect justice to ever truly come. He said living with this as his family history has made him incredibly proud of his great grandparents but also numb to patriotism and distrusting of the criminal justice system.

"Living here isn't something that I'm proud of," he said. "It's simply where my family resides. I think ultimately that makes a very large impact on how I personally view things. It builds less pride in country. . . . It's led to less confidence in the justice system and ultimately having consequences for unjust actions."