Sherry Cannon, left, gasps as she and Pam Adams read the names of some of the 4,400 victims of lynching etched onto 800 corten steel beams hanging at the National Memorial for Peace and Justice. The memorial, referred to as “the lynching museum,” documents racial terror and inequality in America in a way never before acknowledged and provides a silent, sacred place for reflection, truth and reconciliation.

At lynching memorial, steel columns rise and hang overhead like bodies

A Public Eulogy

BY PAM ADAMS
The new lynching memorial in Montgomery, Ala. is a prayer and a challenge.

The memorial, officially the National Memorial for Peace and Justice, is the end of a public eulogy, in stone and steel, for the long-buried memories of thousands of Black people killed by white mobs during the decades when racial terror was routine.

Rows and rows and rows of hanging coppery-colored steel columns, each engraved with counties, states and the name or names, if known, of Black men, women and children lynched in that county — 805 hanging gravestones memorializing more than 4,000 lynchings documented from 1877 to 1950, almost 60 in Illinois.

Everything about the 6-acre space feels like a call to rise up in the name of each life. A sacred psalm comes to mind. When mercy and truth meet, righteousness and peace kiss, and justice is merciful.

• • •

The structure is a wide-open shelter on a hill near downtown Montgomery, not far from the water fountain in the town square where the enslaved were once sold from the auction block. Not far from where the Confederacy was born. Not far from where Rosa Parks refused to sit in the back of the bus, not far from where the old segregationist governor George Wallace vowed segregation now and forever. Not far from where the massive, blood-stained, 54-mile march from Selma to Montgomery ended with the triumphant, yet vigilant, words of Martin Luther King.

“How long? Not long,” King said that day in 1965, the question edged with the hope that has hung over the nation since the founding fathers compromised on slavery.

None of the sites is far from the Equal Justice Initiative, a non-profit human rights law office founded by Bryan Stevenson, a defense lawyer called the Mandela of our times for his work with the condemned, the wrongfully convicted, the poor.

Why would a law firm build a lynching memorial and a museum? Because defending the poor, even winning major death penalty...
American history is shrouded in stereotypes and false accounts that cripple our ability to move forward and achieve a just and equitable society. In a recent survey, 92 percent of middle school children did not know slavery was a central issue of the Civil War. But, like the lion and the hunter, the tale will never be told accurately until the hunter’s account is truthfully reconciled with the lion’s.

Toward that goal, two new museums unlike any other in our nation opened in April and provide hope for understanding injustice and hope America will be able to tackle its racist culture. The Equal Justice Initiative in Montgomery, Ala., developed The National Memorial for Peace and Justice and The Legacy Museum: From Enslavement to Mass Incarceration. Through a combination of exhibits, design, architecture, sculpture, poetry, literature, emotion and fact, the historical truth of the United States emerges with gut wrenching clarity.

Peoria writers Pam Adams and Sherry Cannon traveled to Montgomery in November to spend several days at these museums, and their accounts are documented in this special Community Word supplement.

Why is it important to understand America’s true history? Why revisit the past? Why re-open old wounds? Because a society built on racism and lies by omission stands on a faulty foundation. The looming collapse hurts not just some but all.

In this eight-page supplement, Adams and Cannon report to the Peoria community what they discovered in Montgomery, what they learned through additional research and why this knowledge is essential for our community and our nation. “Truth is not pretty. It’s not easy, but truth and reconciliation are sequential, so you need to get to the truth first,” said Bryan Stevenson, founder of the Equal Justice Initiative.

Reporting for this special supplement was underwritten by the Journalism Diversity Fund established at the Peoria NAACP with input from Community Word and a major donation from Terry Galvin Matthews along with additional donations from Andrew Hale, Jean and Sam Polk, Ken and Cheryl Hofbauer, Elaine and George Hopkins, Nancy Long and Clare Howard.

Printing the supplement was financed in part by a donation from Doug Stephens.

The supplement can be downloaded and reprinted from www.TheCommunityWord.com.

-- Clare Howard

First Truth; Then Reconciliation; Then Justice
A Continuum from Slavery to Lynching to Mass Incarceration

FIRST REMOVE THE FATHER FROM THE FAMILY Ghanaian artist Kwame Akoto-Bamfo created this sculpture that stands at the entrance to the National Memorial for Peace and Justice near the site of a former warehouse where enslaved Africans were sold. The sculpture conveys the terror, brutality and dehumanizing practice of separating enslaved fathers from their families — a practice that continues today through mass incarceration. The average cost of an enslaved Black man in the 1800s was about $750. At $15,000 in today’s dollars, that’s not that much less than the average annual cost per inmate at many Illinois prisons.

It’s a disconcerting thought. But the Equal Justice Initiative wants us to dwell on it, face it and other uncomfortable truths. For instance: three decades after the Civil War, 75 percent of Alabama’s state revenues came from leasing prison labor. The 13th Amendment ended slavery, except as punishment for convicts.

Confronting that history, says EJI founder Bryan Stevenson, is the only way to change the future. “We have to repair all this damage,” Stevenson has said. He wants the nation to recognize the damage with the knowledge it won’t be condemned, but that there’s a more just, compassionate country on the other side.

The National Memorial for Peace and Justice makes the damage visible in a steel-column testament to thousands of lynching victims. The lynching memorial has brought national attention and tourism to Montgomery, but it’s part of EJI’s broader Community Remembrance Project. EJI has erected markers throughout Montgomery correcting or expanding on many of the city’s other monuments and memorial markers. Communities throughout the South and beyond have already erected historical markers and collected soil from lynching sites. Jars of soil from the sites are on display at the Legacy Museum: From Enslavement to Mass Incarceration. The lynching memorial is surrounded by replicas of each column. Residents from communities where lynchings occurred can claim the replicated column or columns representing their county.

Stevenson often talks about the impact of proximity and how spending time with prisoners changed him and his concept of the criminal justice system. Getting closer to a history of lynching and racial terrorism, he believes, can have the same healing effect in communities throughout the country.

According to EJI, monument distribution to communities probably won’t begin until later this year. Communities that have already participated in other community remembrance projects will be considered first.

Change the future by confronting the past

BY PAM ADAMS

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“Slavery did not end in 1865. It evolved.”

Bryan Stevenson

The six-foot steel slabs at the lynching memorial begin at eye-level. County by county, state by state, death by death, the slabs rise, higher and higher until they hover overhead, like so many bodies once did. Somewhere near the middle of the curving path of hanging steel, the lesson hits home. A legacy of lynching in the Land of Lincoln is not that far from the lynching legacy in the cradle of the Confederacy. Even in Illinois, a 100-year history of legal slavery did not truly end until 1863, two years before the end of the Civil War. And Illinois only ended the death penalty after a series of wrongful convictions exonerated men imprisoned on death row.

Four slabs mark Illinois’ legacy of lynching and racial terrorism. One is devoted to the dozens of Black men, women and children shot, burned or beaten to death by white mobs in the East St. Louis race riots in 1917. Another is a roll call of lynchings from one end of the state to the other. Though most lynchings in Illinois occurred in the southern part of the state, the memorial also documents lynchings in or near Lacon, Lewistown, Decatur and Springfield during the infamous race riots of 1908, which led to the founding of the NAACP.

“We would hear stories as kids,” says Michael McCuskey, a long-time judge who grew up in Sparland. He didn’t know if the stories were true or legend, but he remembers hearing blacks had to be out of Lacon by sundown and something about a lynching on a hill just outside Lacon.

There is a name and a date at a lynching memorial more than 700 miles away, bearing witness to a lynching just outside Lacon in Marshall County in 1898. Peoria County barely escaped a place on one of the columns devoted to Illinois lynchings. In “The History of the Negro in Peoria,” Romeo B. Garrett, Bradley University’s first Black professor, describes two near-lynchings of Black men more than a century ago.

Robert T. Little has not visited Montgomery’s new museum and memorial. Born in Mississippi, raised in Peoria, Little grew up carrying the collective memory of generations who fled the South, the same memories and messages unearthed at the lynching memorial and Legacy Museum.

“My dad showed me the hanging tree,” he said. Little, 74, was in his 20s at the time. He had gone South with his father, the late Frank Little Jr., on one of the family’s regular trips down home to Cruger in Holmes County, Miss. It was a big, thick tree. Little recalls, in an isolated spot on the side of a road.

“If something happened, they didn’t care who they hung. It didn’t have to be the right one. They’d just hang them and leave them up in the tree. That’s the way they kept Blacks under control,” Little says.

“Controlling Black life had been a hallmark of slavery. By the time Little’s father was born in 1919, racial segregation, racial terrorism and lynching were the new tools of a country steeped in white superiority. There were some things he didn’t tell me,” Little said, knowing silence was his father’s way of protecting him from pain, trauma and, most of all, anger.

For more information go to: lynchinginamerica.eji.org
advocate for equality. Stevenson and the EJI created two new museums that opened in April — The Legacy Museum: From Enslavement to Mass Incarceration and the National Memorial for Peace and Justice.

Pam Adams, former reporter at the Journal Star, and I had been warned not to visit both museums on the same day. It’s too emotionally draining.

Our first stop in Montgomery was the Freedom Riders Museum. This is the site of the Greyhound Bus Station where 20 civil rights activists were assaulted while attempting to ride from Washington, D.C., to New Orleans in an effort to integrate inter-state public transport.

On Mother’s Day, May 14, 1961, an angry mob of white people blocked their bus, slashed the tires, broke out the windows and set the bus on fire. John Lewis, a student leader, and two other men were beaten unconscious.

The Equal Justice Initiative uses a combination of poetry, design, research, emotion and historic facts to convey America’s legacy of racial violence and discrimination. This verse of a Maya Angelou poem is on the outside of the Legacy Museum: From Enslavement to Mass Incarceration.

Sherry Cannon reads one of the markers put up throughout Montgomery by the Alabama Historical Commission.

One of the original Freedom Riders was at the museum the day we visited. Rip Patton, a youngish 78-year-old man, generously took pictures with us and spent an hour sharing his memories of the movement. Like those who have fought in war, Patton said there are things a youngish 78-year-old man, generously took pictures with us and spent an hour sharing his memories of the movement. Like those who have fought in war, Patton said there are things others were warehoused in the same place as livestock and cattle.

“Walk with me Lord, walk with me. Walk with me Lord, walk with me. While I’m on this tedious journey, I want Jesus to walk with me!”

And Patton said there are things others were warehoused in the same place as livestock and cattle.

One of the original Freedom Riders was at the museum the day we visited. Rip Patton, a youngish 78-year-old man, generously took pictures with us and spent an hour sharing his memories of the movement. Like those who have fought in war, Patton said there are things that happened that he never talks about, even with those he worked with in the movement. Amazingly, he has no anger or bitterness. For every protest he engaged in, he quoted a scripture from the Bible that served as his motivation.

We made our first visit to the Legacy Museum the following morning. EJI spent a decade conducting research to gather the history of racial injustice and the narratives that tell the stories of victims.

The museum opened on April 26, 2018, on a site that previously warehoused enslaved Black people. It is located midway between the slave market and the river dock and train station where tens of thousands of enslaved people were sold during the height of the domestic slave trade.

Upon entering the museum, through amazing technology, visitors hear firsthand accounts by enslaved people talking about their trauma being captured, held in prison and sold away from families. They were held in dungeons, pens, jails and warehouses. Enslaved Black people were warehoused in the same place as livestock and cattle.

“Walk with me Lord, walk with me. Walk with me Lord, walk with me. While I’m on this tedious journey, I want Jesus to walk with me!”

Mr. Hughes is recorded as saying Black people were treated no better than dogs, and of-...
A section in the museum has shelves of mason jars containing soil from the different lynching sites. Each jar is labeled with the victim’s name, date of his death and county where the lynching occurred.

In an above, next to the mason jars, you can watch videos that tells the stories of victims of lynching. Among another wall in this section of the museum are the names of lynching victims and the reason they were lynched. A few samples of the hundreds of documented lynchings are:

- Robert Mallard was lynched in 1948 in Lyons, Ga., for voting.
- Minister Arthur St. Clair was lynched in 1979 in Brooksville, Fla., for performing a wedding ceremony between a Black man and a white woman.
- John Hartfield was lynched in 1919 in Elsberry, Miss., for allegedly having a white girlfriend.

The local newspaper advertised the lynching and up to 10,000 white men, women and children came to witness this heinous act. He was hung, shot, burned alive, and his lifeless body was tied to a horse and dragged through the town. As you continue through the museum, you see how slavery, Jim Crow and mass incarcerations are linked. The same way a narrative of inferiority was given as a reason to enslave African people, a presumption of guilt and being dangerous has been assigned to African-Americans.

Beginning in 1940 court-ordered execution became America’s solution to the bad optics of lynching. From 1927-1976, 82 percent of people legally executed in Alabama were African-Americans.

For every nine persons executed in the United States since 1976, one person on death row has been exonerated. There have been 160 people on death row proven to be innocent of the crime they were convicted of. In 1972, there were 500,000 people in U.S. prisons. Today there are 2.3 million people incarcerated.

Bryan Stevenson began defending death row inmates about 30 years ago. One wall of the museum is filled with letters EJI received from imprisoned people asking for help.

One letter that stayed with me is from a man named Vernon. Vernon wrote, “As he walked pass my cell with his head bowed low, a guard and a priest silently walking at his elbows, without looking up and tears rolling down his cheeks, I heard him ask, will there be any hand-cuffs in Heaven and chairs for my feet?”

Innocent Black people are seven times more likely to be falsely convicted of murder than white people. In 2015, police killed an average of two unarmed Black people each week.

A study done in 2017 by Georgetown Law Center on poverty and inequality reveals astonishing levels of bias against Black girls.

- Black girls are seen as older than white girls of the same age.
- Black girls are assumed to need less nurturing, protection and support than white girls.
- Black girls are five times more likely to be suspended from school than white girls, and they are suspended two times more often than white boys.

Pam and I returned a second day to the Legacy Museum. Following the advice of Rip Patton, we experienced the museum both days independent of each other. It is not a space where you have to engage with Mr. Pew. He had performed in this same club during segregation. Back then he was not allowed to come in the front door, and he had to sing to an all-white audience with his back turned to them.

Today, Mr. Pew owns the entire building. The clientele this night was still predominantly white. Not only did he not perform with his back to the audience, but every woman in the place was called up by Mr. Pew to sit on a stool while he sang a song to her.

After touring Montgomery, the one thing I know for sure is the abiding faith and strength Black people possess and have demonstrated through slavery, Jim Crow and even today through mass incarceration.

Though it was challenging, I believe as EJI believes, that it is necessary to face this ugly part of American history. The history we won’t face is the history we’re likely to repeat.

Rip Patton was one of the original Freedom Riders who were attacked in 1961 by an angry mob of white people. Patton and other Freedom Riders including the Rev. C.T. Vivian, a former Peorian, were targeted because of their efforts to accelerate the slow pace of integration in the United States. Many Black and white Americans were arrested in the South when they exercised their legal rights.
Unacknowledged at home — here hang the names of lynching victims from Lacon to Decatur to Lewistown

The Equal Justice Initiative documented 56 racial terror lynchings in Illinois, the third highest number among states outside the South. Listed here are some of the lynchings in Central Illinois.

**BY PAM ADAMS**

He was George Stewart or S.W. Stewart or another variation. The name changed from newspaper to newspaper. He may have been part Indian, according to the newspaper in Tolula where his alleged crime occurred.

Several points are consistent among the brief accounts picked up by newspapers around the country. He was a Negro found hanging from a tree near Lacon in November 1893.

At least 100 men from Tolula broke into the Lacon jail, where he was taken after his arrest for hitting Mary O’Brien of Tolula in the head with a stone, knocking her unconscious. When the sheriff refused to turn him over to the mob, they broke down the door and dragged Stewart from the cell.

By the time the sheriff found him, he was hanging from a low limb of a tree in Hall Cemetery, just east of Lacon, a few yards from the road, dressed only in undershirt and drawers, according to the Tolula Star. A coroner’s jury later ruled he died by strangulation “at the hands of persons unknown.”

The long-ago lynching in central Illinois might never have come up were it not for the Equal Justice Initiative; some 700 miles away in Montgomery, Ala. EJI, founded by acclaimed human rights attorney Bryan Stevenson, recently opened the National Memorial for Peace and Justice, the nation’s first memorial to lynching victims, following extensive research on the legacy of lynching, primarily in the South but also in other regions of the country.

The memorial pays homage to more than 4,000 victims, known and unknown, of the racial terror that plagued the South and other parts of the country following the Civil War. Stewart is listed by yet another name, F.W. Steward, on one of four steel-column memorials devoted to lynchings in Illinois.

Lynchings were a common response to white-on-white crime during the 1800s. But Stevenson and others who research lynching make a distinction between lynchings solely for alleged crimes and racialized lynchings backed up by a legacy of slavery and legal racial discrimination. They also use a broader definition than hanging.

Researchers note the difficulties and differences between researching racial terror lynchings in the North and South.

Michael Pfeifer, a history professor at John Jay College of Criminal Justice, has written two books on lynching, including “Lynching Beyond Dixie.” Much of the research on racial terror lynchings in the North and West is incomplete, he says. Though he credits EJI for raising interest in many communities, he says the field needs much more investigation.

Lynchings in the Midwest often lack good documentation. Stevenson told the on-line magazine Belt. White white southerners were often willing to glorify racial violence, while northerners tended to be more discreet, particularly after the early 1900s.

The cultural memory loss means, in some ways, the Midwest is more prone to historical amnesia than the South, Stevenson says in the interview.

Two exceptions may be the Springfield race riot of 1908, which led to the founding of the NAACP, and the East St. Louis race riots of 1917. It’s one of the earliest documented cases of lynchings in Illinois.

Many Decatur residents acknowledge the lynching of Sam Bush, a day-laborer from the South lynched in 1893. A lynch mob from Mt. Zion dragged him from the Decatur jail, where he was being held on rape charges. Bush prayed and protested his innocence as the mob prepared the noose, according to newspaper reports. The mob hung him from a telegraph pole across from Macon County Courthouse.

The most recent lynching documented for central Illinois occurred in November 1943, near Camp Ellis, the massive military training center that housed German prisoners of war. One of a gang of farmers shot and killed Pvt. Hollie Willis, 19, of Chicago, who had allegedly made harassing phone calls to women from an unoccupied farm house near the base.

“Negro, Found In Farm Home, Shot by Farmer Posse,” read the headline in the Canton Daily Ledger. “Soldier Lynched at Camp Ellis By Farm Posse,” said the Chicago Defender, one of the nation’s largest Black newspapers. The farmers thought Willis was another Black soldier accused of raping a white woman. Less than 10 minutes after hearing evidence from 10 witnesses, a coroner’s jury ruled the shooting was justifiable homicide.

Marion Cornelius has not heard anything about the incident in the 15 years he has curated exhibits at Easley Pioneer Museum, which preserves Camp Ellis history.

If there was racial tension surrounding the incident, it wouldn’t surprise him. “I’m 80, and I can still remember racial tensions in this area stemming from the Civil War” when brothers fought against brothers, he said.

Many veterans once stationed at Camp Ellis have visited the museum, Cornelius said. Even some former German POWs have returned. But he doesn’t recall a Black alumni of the military base ever visiting.

Lynching victims in Central Illinois

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BY PAM ADAMS

The Equal Justice Initiative documented 56 racial terror lynchings in Illinois, the third highest number among states outside the South. Listed here are some of the lynchings in Central Illinois.

* Andrew Richards, 9/11/1877, Winchester, Scott County
* Nelson Howard, 7/9/1883, Mound City, Pulaski County
* Alonzo Holly, 2/14/1888, Pinckneyville, Perry County
* Sam Bush, 6/3/1893, Decatur, Macon County
* George Stewart, also referred to as S.W. Stewart or F.W. Steward, 11/7/1893, near Lacon, Marshall County
* Unknown, 10/15/1902, Union County
* Unknown, 3/27/1903, Union County
* Unknown, 4/26/1903, New Thebes, Alexander County
* Scott Burton, 8/15/1908, Springfield, Sangamon County
* William Donegan, 8/15/1908, Springfield, Sangamon County
* William ‘Troogg’ James, 11/11/1909, Cairo, Alexander County
* Unknown, 11/12/1913, Tamms, Alexander County
* Unknowns, at least 40, possibly as many as 200, July 1-3, 1917, the East St. Louis race riots, St. Clair County
* William Bell, 10/8/1924, Chicago, Cook County
* Pvt. Hollie (or Hallery in some accounts) Willis, 11/8/1943, near Lewistown, Fulton County

Sources: Equal Justice Initiative and “Lynching Beyond Dixie,” by Michael Pfeifer

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"NATIONAL MEMORIAL FOR PEACE AND JUSTICE  Conceived by the Equal Justice Initiative and set on a hill overlooking Montgomery, Ala., this memorial to racial violence is a giant Minimalist sculpture with maximalist emotional content: The hundreds of steel plates that make up its structure are inscribed with the names of many of the 4,000 African Americans lynched from 1877 to 1950. A second site downtown, the Legacy Museum: From Enslavement to Mass Incarceration, brings the story of white supremacy into the present. Together, they pack a wallop. You come away changed.” – Holland Cotter, The Best of 2018 Art, The New York Times, Dec. 9, 2018
“You all are my therapists.” People who care.

BY PAM ADAMS

“At the site where you are standing, enslaved people were imprisoned with livestock, horses, pigs and cattle.”

This is the Legacy Museum: From Enslavement to Mass Incarceration. The museum site shares a trendy, brick-paved alleyway of bars and restaurants just off Commerce Street, a main drag in downtown Montgomery.

In front of the Equal Justice Initiative, the human rights law firm located along Commerce between the Hank Williams Museum and a Jimmy John’s, is a marker that points out just what the major commerce was during the early part of Montgomery’s history.

The museum, opened in April by the EJI in the former slave warehouse adjoining its office, also highlights the business of slavery.

Montgomery is a city shaped by slavery and the legacy of this horrific era is all around you.

The legacy was supposed to be confined to the exhibits. But there he was, Kuntrell Jackson, a real-life legacy of enslavement-to-mass incarceration.

He was standing a few steps from an interactive video simulation of a prison visit.

Pick up the telephone, view and hear former inmates, all EJI clients and breathe in the personal voices recounting the politics of mass incarceration.

Jackson’s video is featured in the exhibit along with four others. Anthony Ray Hinton, for example, spent 30 years on Alabama’s death row for a crime he didn’t commit. At 17, Robert Caston was sentenced to die in a Louisiana prison. He served more than 45 years before EJI won a landmark U.S. Supreme Court case declaring juvenile mandatory life-without-parole sentences unconstitutional. The decision paved the way for almost 3,000 resentencing hearings across the country, including in Illinois. Caston was released in 2012 at age 64.

“We went straight to picking cotton, cutting sugar cane or whatever it took in the fields,” Caston says in the video, referring to his first days at the notorious Louisiana prison known as Angola.

But Caston, Hinton and the others were video images. Jackson was there, in the flesh, watching us as we watched him in the video.

Like Caston, he won a new sentencing hearing after the Supreme Court ruling on harsh juvenile sentences. Imprisoned in Arkansas at the age of 14, he had served 17 years by the time he was paroled in 2017.

Jackson would have been easy to mistake as just another face in the crowd. But somehow he had gotten into a discussion with a group from Virginia.

He works and takes classes, he told the group, and he visits the museum everyday.

Asked why, he said, “To meet people like you.”

The answer led a therapist in the group to ask if he had received counseling. He made it clear he was not a fan of counselors or counseling.

“You all are my therapists,” he said. “I stand right here and watch you watching me. That helps me more than anything. I see people being so sincere about my pain and struggle and they don’t even know me. You didn’t even know I was here.”

The exchange between Jackson and the therapist had a tense edge. The tension dissolved when another girl in the group stepped forward. Jackson braced himself for her question.

“I just want a hug,” she said. “My brother’s been in solitary confinement and I haven’t talked to him for a month.”

The museum is a visual history, a tormenting horde of words and images under 11,000 square feet.

Holograms of actors, using words directly from slave narratives, evoke the pain and trauma of slavery; blown-up banners of catalogues of the sale of human property, “they have been absolutely controlled but never abused,” exact wording of state and local laws enforcing everything from separate playgrounds for amateur baseball games to separate carnival ticket booths for white and Black; town signs boasting whites-only policies; Civil Rights Movement backlash, followed by details on the impact of the drug war (Between Nixon’s law-and-order crusade and the war on drugs, incarceration escalated from 300,000 to 2.3 million, starting in 1971).

Wall-to-floor banners line one side:

Kidnapped? 12 million during the transatlantic slave trade
Terrorized by threat of racial violence? 9 million.
Segregated? 10 million.
African-American citizens incarcerated? 8 million Americans under criminal control

And this quote, easily missed among the displays, videos and interactive exhibits:

“The criminal justice system remains the institution in American life least impacted by the Civil Rights Movement.”
Modern-day evolution of lynching continues

BY SHERRY CANNON

Pam Adams and I arrived at the National Memorial for Peace and Justice on a cold, rainy day. We had a sense of urgency. This museum was the purpose of our trip from Peoria to Montgomery, Ala. On this sacred, quiet 6-acre site, there are 4,400 lives documented: Lynched. We felt a responsibility to hear from them all, but if thunder and lightning developed, the site would be forced to close.

Much of this museum is outside, with 800 corten steel columns silently hanging overhead.

Also referred to as the National Lynching Memorial, this site gives testimony to the African-American men, women and children who were lynched in this country between 1877-1950.

Equal Justice Initiative (EJI) began work on the memorial in 2010. EJI was not only interested in the lynching incidents, but in understanding the terror and trauma created by this sanctioned violence against the Black community. Six million Black people fled the South as a result of this racial reign of terror.

The word lynching by definition is an unlawful murder by an angry mob of people. It most often involved public hangings that were used primarily in the South after the end of slavery to intimidate Black people.

The memorial has 800 6-foot steel beams, one for each county where a lynching took place. Each beam is inscribed with the names of victims, date of murder and the state and county where they lived.

On the outside of the memorial is a field of 800 identical monuments. These are monuments waiting to be claimed and installed in the counties they represent. The objective is to help local communities engage with their histories in a constructive and meaningful way.

There is no monument for Peoria County, but we saw monuments for the central Illinois counties of Marshall, Fulton and Sangamon.

EJI believes that publicly confronting the truth about our history is the first step towards recovery and reconciliation. EJI Director Bryan Stevenson explains, “This shadow cannot be lifted until we shine the light of truth on the destructive violence that shaped our nation, traumatized people of color, and compromised our commitment to the rule of law and to equal justice.”

As we made our way through the memorial, I didn’t quite know how I was feeling. The chill and the rain had me slightly distracted. We were looking at names engraved on columns. Then we saw a particular slab, and it had multiple names — all lynched on the same day.

There was one like that for East St. Louis. On July 3, 1917, an outbreak of labor- and race-related violence by whites caused the deaths of 40 to 100 Black people and did approximately $400,000 in property damage in the Black community.

Then I saw documentation of a lynching that hit close to me. My family.

None of my research, to date, can verify the family connection. Through a first cousin, I was able to locate two newspaper accounts of Love Rudd’s murder.

The Carbondale Daily Free Press dated Sept. 11, 1915, reported no one knew the whereabouts of Love Rudd, who was taken from Constable Ross’ men by a mob of masked men. He was taken into a dense wooded area, and rumors were that he was lynched. Another rumor was that he was horswhipped and driven from the county.

Love had often been accused of robbing hen roosts. According to the Sept. 13, 1915, Chillicothe (Mo.) Constitution, Love Rudd was a robbery suspect who was taken from the constable by a mob of 30 to 40 masked men several days before. His body was found in the Mississippi River near Clarksville, Mo. Love’s hands were still bound by the constable’s handcuffs and his feet were tied to a large rock.

Bill McDowell was lynched on July 1, 1883, in Louisiana, Mo., accused of raping a white woman. The account of his murder is that 75 to 100 masked men demanded the keys to the cell he was being held in and the marshal turned the keys over.

Bill McDowell was lynched on June 6, 1898. They were accused of killing a city marshal. A mob estimated between 200 to 300 men accosted the brothers and hung them. The brothers’ bodies were left hanging on trees. No one was ever charged or convicted for any of these murders. They were all attributed to a mob of masked men.

Writing this piece, about a month after walking through the National Lynching Museum, feels like deja vu in today’s climate. The names Edie Russell Jr., Daniel O’El, Luis Cruz, Sandra Bland, Michael Brown, Eric Garner, Laquan McDonald, Emmanuel Bradford Jr., Irvell Roberson, Botham Jean, Melissa Williams and Timothy Russell are just a dozen names of thousands of others that could be considered modern-day lynchings — all stoking the debate about police violence.

How long will we refuse to recognize the murders of Black men and women in this country as a national crisis? How long will we allow this premature death of young Black men and women to continue? How many dreams killed are too many?