

Investigating Civil Rights Era Murders

Activists, reporters and the FBI work cold cases

BY LEE A. DANIELS

What kind of human being could set another man on fire?

This was the question that Stanley Nelson, a reporter for The Concordia Sentinel, a small weekly newspaper in the Louisiana Delta town of Ferriday, says first spurred him to exhaustively investigate the 1964 murder of a black Delta businessman, allegedly by the Ku Klux Klan.

Now, Nelson believes he knows the name of the last living man who took part in the crime. He named the man, now 71 years old, in a long, gripping story on the case published last month by the Sentinel.

The killing of Frank Morris, who owned a shoe repair and dry goods shop and served both black and white customers in rural Ferriday (Morris is the man



Frank Morris, the man in the visor, was murdered in 1964 allegedly by the Ku Klux Klan. A Louisiana reporter has uncovered evidence of the last living man who took part in the crime.

in the visor in the accompanying photograph), is one of more than 100 race-related murders of blacks and whites from the late 1940s to the late 1960s being examined by both the Federal Bureau of Investigation and the Civil Rights Cold Case Project, a consortium of journalists.

Though Frank Morris' death was brutal, murder was not the initial intent of his killers. Following the Southern white-racist "tradition" of forcing successful black entrepreneurs out of business, they had gone to his shop in the early morning to burn it down, thinking he wouldn't be there. But he sur-

prised them. So he was doused with gasoline and set afire, too.

Burned beyond recognition, Morris lingered in agony for four days before dying. During that time he was interviewed by the FBI, but never identified the criminals.

The story of the murder of Frank Morris, like those of the other cases on the poignant Cold Case roster, recalls an era in American history when liberty and justice for all was not the law of the land, when a regime of profound cruelty ruled an entire region, and when unspeakable crimes were committed and

respectable people pretended not to know who was responsible.

That era ended. But the impact of many of the enormous wrongs committed in those decades continues. Federal officials say that, overwhelmingly, most of the men and women who in fact were responsible for the Cold Case murders will never be indicted or even named as suspects because, given the passage of time, the evidence against them is now too insubstantial. It is an assessment that brings with it much bitterness.

Yet one can still believe that even in these cases the long "arc of the moral universe" Martin Luther King, Jr. often spoke of (drawing on the words of the 19th-century abolitionist Theodore Parker) bends toward justice.

Why? The answer lies in the question that has consumed Stanley Nelson—who since 2007 has written dozens of stories on the case—and many others. The very asking "What kind of a human being could ...?" is a declaration of intent to not let these crimes—and the stories of the lives of the innocents—vanish from the pages of history.

Lee A. Daniels is director of communications for the NAACP Legal Defense Fund and editor-in-chief of *TheDefendersOnline*.

Black History Month events at

REED COLLEGE

WWW.REED.EDU/BHM/INDEX.HTML Events are free and open to the public.

Reed Celebrates Black History Month 2011

Ethnic Heritage Ensemble

PERFORMANCE: FEBRUARY 5
7:30 P.M., ELIOT HALL CHAPEL

For more than 30 years, the Ethnic Heritage Ensemble has carried on the African American tradition of percussive jazz from a distinctly Midwest-Chicago perspective. The ensemble features the talents of three internationally renowned musicians: Dr. Kahil El'Zabar, percussionist, composer, and a prolific jazz innovator; Ernest Dawkins, a premier jazz saxophonist and composer; and Corey Wilkes, trumpet, an artist in residence and board member with the Jazz Institute of Chicago.



Annette Gordon-Reed

LECTURE: FEBRUARY 19, 7:30 P.M., KAUL AUDITORIUM

Annette Gordon-Reed, a professor of law at New York Law School since 1992 and winner of the 2009 Pulitzer Prize in History for her book *The Hemingses of Monticello: An American Family* (W.W. Norton, 2008), is recognized as one of our country's most distinguished presidential scholars.

Manning Marable

LECTURE: FEBRUARY 26, 7:30 P.M., KAUL AUDITORIUM

Manning Marable is the M. Moran Weston and Black Alumni Council Professor of African-American Studies and professor of history and public affairs at Columbia University. He was founding director of African American Studies at Columbia from 1993 to 2003. Since 2002, he has directed Columbia's Center for Contemporary Black History.

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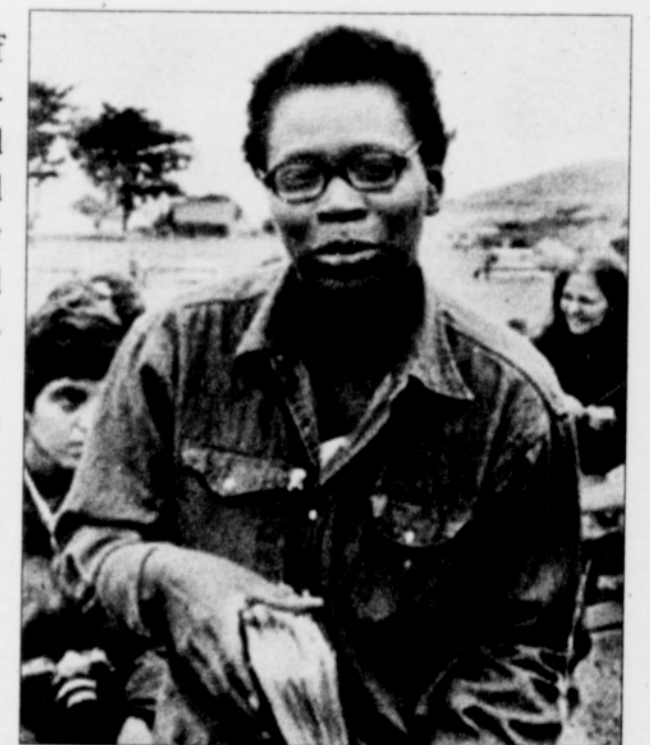
Local Radical's Legacy Celebrated

The radical legacy of Pat Parker, a black lesbian-feminist, poet and warrior, will be celebrated during a Black History Month event at the Bread and Roses Center, 6834 N.E. Glisan St.

Parker (1944-1989) was a community organizer, writer, mother, and an opponent of all forms of bigotry.

Hear Parker's words and learn about her contributions to the movements for social and economic justice during this special event on Wednesday, Feb. 9 at 7 p.m.

A Southern-style meal, with vegan option will be available at 6:30 p.m. for a \$6-8 donation. Everyone is welcome.



Pat Parker