

September 20, 2018

Dear Friends,

I have let a lot of time slip by since the last newsletter (Feb.) so this one will be hefty. I hope you find it both informative and inspiring.

In March I went back to Harris County, Ga., for a memorial service to honor Henry “Peg” Gilbert who was murdered by the police chief and others in the Hamilton jail in 1947. You’ll remember Gilbert, a Lagrange resident, was also memorialized in Lagrange with other lynching victims. At that service, Fr. Jeff Jackson, a Harris County Episcopal minister, asked Gilbert’s granddaughter, Sheila Moss Brown, what Harris County could do to remedy the great wrong committed there. She asked simply that new tombstones be provided for her grandparents. After that a biracial committee of 100 Harris citizens was formed to carry out her wishes and to become a permanent force for racial healing. They worked carefully with both Troup Together and Racial Trustbuilding, the grassroots citizens organizations responsible for a series of healing programs in Lagrange, as well as with the extended Gilbert family. The service was held at the church Henry Gilbert served as deacon and treasurer and where he and his wife, Mae, are buried. Speakers included the amazing Prof. Margaret Burnham, whose work with students through Northeastern Law School’s Civil Rights and Restorative Justice Project (CRRJ), on Gilbert’s murder, as well as *The Family Tree*, led to these services. We are not done with this case she said. There is more out there. She impressed upon the audience the importance of sharing information they might still have in this and other cases. Judge Ron Mullins of the Chattahoochee Valley Superior Court made a strong and honest statement and I spoke of how Gilbert’s 1947 murder was still fresh on the mind of old black men when I made my research rounds during the 1990’s, of how his friend Cornelius Bugg pointed his finger at me and said of my sheriff grandfather, it happened on his watch and how, seeing how lasting was the trauma inflicted by that lynching lived on not only in the family but friends and the wider African American community, I could not shake the burden of needing to be accountable. I read a letter I wrote to Mr. Gilbert’s last remaining daughter, Recie Moss, and, later, Sheila Gilbert Moss would tell the audience that her mother said the note changed her mother’s life. Longtime Harris County Sheriff Mike Jolley, to everyone’s surprise, also expressed regret that law enforcement failed to protect Henry Gilbert. This from the *Atlanta Journal Constitution*: “We should have protected him,” said Jolley, who is in his seventh term as the chief law enforcement official in the small county north of Columbus. “I acknowledged and accepted the fact that Harris County and the involvement was inappropriate and wrong, and it should have never happened.” He merely hinted at the fact Gilbert was murdered **by law enforcement** and the murders were protected by the top law enforcement official, my grandfather, the sheriff.

For more on this story: www.myajc.com/blog/investigations/georgia-sheriff-acknowledges-law-enforcement-role-1947-lynching/mxFfz8lWaLTck3EFIXh3M/

The Civil Rights and Restorative Justice Project’s excellent description of the service:
<https://crrj.northeastern.edu/henry-peg-gilbert/>

Sheila Moss and I appeared on Georgia Public Broadcasting in May to discuss this story:

<http://www.gpbnews.org/post/her-grandfather-was-lynched-georgia-70-years-ago-there-was-no-therapy-back-then>

Sheila and I will be panelists in October at a 3-day conference in New Orleans entitled “Linking the Past and Present: Addressing the Harm of Racial Violence by Law Enforcement” and co-sponsored by CRRJ and the National Network for Safe Communities “to consider new ways of understanding and addressing the legacy of historic harm done by law enforcement to communities of color.” Chief Lou Dekmar, president of the International Association of Chief of Police and other police chiefs and officers will participate as well as Prof. Burnham.

In April I joined African American family members and many others with whom I have worked for two decades to bring recognition and reparation to lynching victims and their descendants in Montgomery, Alabama, for the opening of Equal Justice Initiative’s magnificent Slavery Museum and Memorial for Peace and Justice. Each corner I turned seemed to bring forth another old friend and memory worker: Henry Banks, an African American journalist from Duluth, Mn., who xx years ago raised \$400,000 for the first local lynching memorial; Warren Read, who confessed his grandfather’s Duluth lynching crime in *The Lynching in Me*, walked hand in hand with a descendant of one of his grandfather’s victims. I spent good time with Dr. Fran Kaplan and Brad Pruitt, two of the principal people behind Milwaukee’s America’s Black Holocaust Museum (abhmuseum.org) and conveners of an excellent conference on lynching memorialization in ’16. I spent some time with Christopher Squires and his grandmother Deborah Dawson, descendants of people enslaved by my ancestors, discussing some of the sad stories the Memorial tells, and joined Jackie Irvine and her sisters Jennifer Jordan and Angela Davis and other family members at the Slavery Museum; they are African American cousins through John Moore, the youngest man lynched in Hamilton in 1912.

This historic occasion generated a great outflow of research and writing about lynching history, which has continued until now. I was commissioned to write an article for *The Guardian*, published the day before the Opening. <https://www.theguardian.com/profile/karen-branan> It was reprinted in the Atlanta Journal Constitution. I am now writing a blog about all the local activity around lynching generated by EJI’s National Memorial for Peace and Justice. Here’s a brief look:

Each of the 800-plus columns hanging there represents a county. Each contains a list of names. Each column has a twin lying in the grass some distance away. Each column waits to be claimed by its county, a sign that county has studied the lynching, has found ways to atone for the lynching, has made a proper public space for it to be displayed and respected. I look at some counties to see how this brilliant call to claim a column is being treated. If you have any information to add to the article, please send it.

In early May Jackie Jordan Irvine and I were invited to appear with NYTimes reporters Rachel Swarns and John Eligon Facebook/Live. We skyped from our living rooms and I, being ignorant of the program, guessed that maybe a half dozen folks were watching. You can imagine my surprise when I later realized we had 260,000 viewers. Even more surprising was when I discovered my photo with Jackie at the Slavery Museum on the front page of the *Times*, directing readers to a story on p. 14.

<https://www.facebook.com/nytimes/videos/racenynt-a-lynchings-legacy/10151571922669999/>

Hundreds of comments in both the Facebook Live and *Times* story are interesting....some the same old predictable “I didn’t lynch anybody” bosh and others demonstrating a great hunger in the country for

more Coming to the Table, Confessing, and Connecting. If you're feeling gloomy, I suggest you read them. Here's one: "These two women, with great courage, have done what needs to be done over and over again. We must begin anew conversations about race. And we must find the courage to be honest. It's been said of the Memorial for Peace and Justice in Montgomery is hoped to provide a grounds for truth and reconciliation and that from that process, through the difficult conversations we must have to begin the healing, we can begin to move on. Without having it, and without the courage to own our collective responsibility for the atrocities to Africans, we cannot heal. Nor can they. Someone said, after seeing the museum, you must evangelize. I believe that is true. We are indeed privileged as whites above all people of color and we must use that for good. For healing. For we are the only ones who do not have to live in fear because of our status in matters of race."

Also, in May I spoke at a seminar (After Evil: The Ethical Dynamics of Addressing the Past) for theology students at the U.S. Holocaust Museum, conducted by my friend Dr. Katharina von Kellenbach, author of *The Mark of Cain: Guilt in the Post-War Lives of Nazi Perpetrators*.

In October I'll be speaking to one of Rachel Swarns's journalism classes at NYU and interviewed by another of her classes the next day. Otherwise, there are book club presentations, talks to senior groups and churches – all as energizing and satisfying and upsetting and growth-producing as when I began this talking thing almost three years ago. But I really must sit down to write on a deeper level of the things that I have experienced and learned in the process.

Coming May 2019 – a new book: *Slavery's Descendants: Shared Legacies of Race & Reconciliation*. This is an anthology produced by writers associated with Coming to the Table and published by Rutgers University Press. In "Making Connections," I tell some of my story of building relationships with African American cousins and descendants of people enslaved by my ancestors.

<https://www.rutgersuniversitypress.org/slaverys-descendants/9781978800762>

Thanks for listening and for your very important support and for all the things you are doing to move this nation beyond white supremacy, beyond racism, and deeply into the Beloved Community. Please share your stories on karenbranan.com/stories or in an email to me.

Best,

Karen Branan