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MY ACCOUNT SIGN OUT

Museum's cooperative civil rights exhibit opens Aug. 18

Posted by Kevin Lee | Aug 8, 2018 | Artifice | 0 | ★★★★★

For a humble laborer, Rayfield Davis will receive high honors: observation in a city museum and a street with his name. Too bad it took his brutal death to get it.

Davis is one of six racially motivated murder victims in a collaborative exhibit between the Civil Rights and Restorative Justice Project at Northeastern University School of Law (CRRJ) and the History Museum of Mobile (111 S. Royal St.), opening Aug. 18. All were killed during the period 1942-48, when Jim Crow still loomed over Dixie.

Davis was a 53-year-old Brookley Air Force Base worker whose limp body was found March 7, 1948, in a drainage ditch near Tennessee and Broad streets. Dying shortly afterward, the black man's death certificate listed "beating and

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immersion in water” as causes. The coroner supposed a blackjack or brass knuckles was used to create such damage.

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Within days, Brookley mechanic Horace M. Miller confessed to the assault. The white 20-year-old said he and Davis left a city bus at Broad and Tennessee before Davis told him “their friend President Truman would soon make the negro more important than the white man,” that it was motivation for the enraged beating with fists and feet. A grand jury sympathized with Miller and declined to indict him.

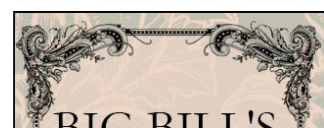
Miller’s family and friends in Mississippi told reporters they planned a banquet “to relieve him of this terrible ordeal.” Despite the NAACP’s efforts, he was never prosecuted.

“Our perspective is even though the perpetrator might be alive, these families deserve some form of justice and that often comes in the form of recognition and raising awareness,” Restorative Justice Project Director Kaylie Simon said.

Where Davis’ body was discovered, a street sign noting its honorary designation as Rayfield Davis Street will be unveiled Aug. 18 at 10 a.m. Attendees are invited to join Davis’ family at the museum following the ceremony.

Other cases in the exhibit:

- In 1943, Ennis Bell was shot four times by police while in his backyard. The 24-year-old had been accused of stealing food from a grocery truck.
- In 1943, 36-year-old Johnny Williams was shot and killed by Harold Davis during an altercation with Davis’ brother over clothes left at Superior Cleaners. Davis was initially arrested, then freed.



- In 1944, Pvt. Theodore Wesley Samuels was shot by Mobile Police Department Officer John Waldrop while standing outside a nightclub. Samuels was home on furlough.

- In 1945, 25-year-old Prentiss McCann was shot in the head twice by police officer Melvin Porter as he stood outside the Midway Club on Dublin Street. The officer said the shooting was accidental as his firearm “got caught up in the door” of his vehicle.

- Best known among the victims is Pvt. Henry Williams. Stationed at Brookley in 1942, a fully uniformed Williams was shot three times by bus driver Grover Chandler. The driver was never prosecuted.

Local civil rights champion John LeFlore threatened boycotts and submitted demands to the Mobile Light and Railroad Co., including the dismissal of Chandler. Some provisions were agreed upon — drivers were disarmed, for instance — but Chandler was merely transferred, not fired.

Their stories will fill a gallery just inside the museum’s front entrance through the end of August. The greatest portion of the exhibit will be from the CRRJ-Nobles Archives where close to 1,000 cases are preserved.

“They’ve sent us newspaper clippings, records, death certificates, NAACP correspondence. Also, for Rayfield Davis, I think family members have put together several pages from a scrapbook,” Assistant Curator of Collections Seth Kinard said.

In 2013, CRRJ first approached the museum about a joint exhibit but it fell through the cracks during a contentious shift in leadership. It resurfaced recently as board member Yvette Chestang led the local effort.

Launched in 2008, CRRJ looks at racially motivated killings across the South from 1930 to 1970. The painstaking investigations often have small beginnings, from old news articles or clippings from a senior thesis.

“We’ll go back and do public records requests, we’ll talk to descendants of the people who were killed and we’ll rebuild the case,” Simon said.

CRRJ’s work made Davis’ descendants fully aware of his fate. More of their family’s story will appear in our Aug. 15 issue.

“We’ve talked about in the future expanding our reach because of course there was violence all over the country, not just in the South, but it was heavily concentrated in the South,” Simon said. “We are operating against time so we



have to stay focused, because we are really trying to interview people who either were alive or their parents or grandparents were.”

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ABOUT THE AUTHOR



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Kevin Lee has served as Lagniappe arts editor since 2003. He won Mobile Press Club awards for both Best Commentary Print and In-Depth Reporting for Non-Daily Newspaper in 2004 and 2005.



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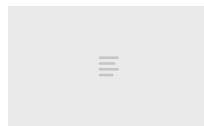
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