

# Waco leaders snub memory of lynching

By Tuala Williams  
Special to Sentinel-Voice  
WACO, Texas (NNPA) - Painful reminders of Billie Holiday's "Strange Fruit" and Waco's shameful history stain the walls of the McLennan county courthouse. It is a reminder that government officials have recently taken pains to restore but refuse to apologize.

Despite the thrust in America to promote diversity and cultural sensitivity, McLennan County commissioners agreed in 2002 to restore a mural entitled, "Hangman's Noose," painted by Ruth Smith, the wife of the administrative assistant to Bob Poage, a long-term Congressman of the county. Termites had infiltrated the mural and were eating it through the wall.

"When I saw the picture it stood out to me. It, basically, offended me. I knew that they would have to restore it. That's when I started questioning the mural itself," said Lester Gibson, McLennan County's only Black Commissioner.

The mural is reminiscent to many of the 1916 incident popularly known as "Waco's Horror."

"African-Americans here

explained to me that it was symbolic, something to hang over our heads," said Gibson.

While according to the "Texas Handbook," 492 recorded lynchings took place in Texas between 1882 and 1930, it is agreed by many that the Waco lynching of Jesse Washington, the inspiration for the mural, was one of the worst by far.

Washington was a 17-year-old, mentally deficient Black farmhand who had been accused of the rape and murder of 53-year-old Lucy Fryer, a White woman.

Washington's family had been living on Fryer's land for five months and Washington had been seen planting cotton only 250 yards away from the Fryer house that morning. Allegedly, Washington confessed to the crime and was whisked away to a Dallas jail to prevent a mob from lynching him.

However, after being found guilty by a Waco jury, Klansmen, seizing Washington from his courtroom seat, hung and burned him in the center of the town before a mob of thousands of cheering townsmen — but not before amputating his fingers and removing his fingernails as souvenirs of Waco justice.

Many postcards and photos of the incident were circulated throughout Texas. One such postcard reads, "This is the barbecue we had last night. My picture is to the left with a cross over it. Your son, Joe." Repeated references to eating are found in lynching-related correspondence, such as "coon cooking," "barbecue," and "main fare."

According to "The First Waco Horror," a book written by Patricia Bernstein, "While the newspapers and the journals chewed over the grisly story of the Waco Horror, the NAACP took immediate action. On May 16, 1916, one day after the lynching of Washington, Royal Freeman Nash, the White social worker who was then secretary of the NAACP, wired Elisabeth Freeman in Fort Worth, where she remained following the statewide suffrage convention in Dallas."

Nash believed Freeman would be able to use her suffrage work as a cover while she investigated the lynching. He instructed her to gather all the details of the crime and any evidence that would help them bring charges against the lynch

mob. However, no one was ever brought to justice for Washington's murder, nor has there been an official apology for the well-publicized crime.

"I had been hearing about it all of my life," Gibson said in an interview. "It's a wound that has not healed in the mindset of the African-American community. It's going to continue to be passed on from generation to generation. I think that the only thing that can basically bring McLennan County together is some reconciliation of the matter."

Toward that end, in 2002 Gibson drew up a resolution both condemning and apologizing for the acts of lynching that colored the county's history. County Commissioners rejected the resolution four to one.

Two years later, in a minor victory for Gibson and McLennan County Blacks, on May 23, Commissioners approved a drafted resolution condemning the lynchings that litter McLennan's past.

Stopping short of an apology, the resolution acknowledges the fact the lynching occurred and that people of all colors and races were affected by it. Further stating:

"WHEREAS the McLennan County court does not condone the actions or conduct of the mobs involved in past acts of lynching; and "NOW THEREFORE BE IT RESOLVED THAT, in an effort to promote healing of lingering wounds and to look to the future in an effort to build a more united, inclusive community for all citizens of McLennan County, the McLennan County Commissioners Court hereby condemns all past unlawful acts and lynchings and the "mob mentality" that fostered these despicable acts of violence which tarnished our great county, state and nation...."

Despite the resolution condemning past acts of lynching and the declaring their desire to "promote the healing of lingering wounds," officials rejected the resolution submitted by the Community Race Relations Coalition that included an apology.

"It's a very ugly part of history," said Ray Meadows, a McLennan county commissioner, in an interview. "I regret that it happened, but as far as me coming out to apologize... I didn't have anything to do with it."

Gibson doesn't agree.

Officials also rejected Gibson's request to hang the resolution near the mural. Meadows said he wanted to "remain consistent."

If our predecessors didn't apologize then, they should apologize for the injustice now, Gibson said, adding that those who took Washington (the Klan) should have been prosecuted.

Ironically, the only other person prosecuted following the lynching was A.T. Smith, editor of the *Paul Quinn Weekly*, a Black newspaper. According to the "Handbook of Texas Online," Smith was convicted of criminal libel after printing allegations that Lucy Fryer's husband had committed the murder.

While there has been no apology, the foreperson of the jury did criticize law officers for not protecting Washington, and Baylor University passed resolutions denouncing the mob.

The Waco City Council held discussion concerning a response to the resolution request from Community Race Relations Coalition in the May 16 work session.

Tuala Williams writes for the *Dallas Examiner*. Robyn H. Jimenez contributed to this report.

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