Article published Sep 4, 2005

The Newberry Six

Sunlight streams through the branches of the grand oaks that line the dirt roads around Pleasant Plain United Methodist Church in Jonesville, west of Gainesville.

Behind the church live some of the descendants of the Newberry Six, four men and two women who were lynched by a mob - one was shot, five were hanged - on Aug. 19, 1916.

The victims' kin live next to the church, just as their parents and grandparents did before them. Here, everyone knows just about everyone.

The residents have been asked about the killings before, by historians, students and those just curious. Here, one man's history is the oral history of the community, and even small children know of the Newberry Six. Physical reminders of the event exist only in the cemetery behind Pleasant Plain, where at least three of the victims on that tragic, vengeful day are buried.

The granddaughter of Jim Dennis, one of those murdered, stands in her living room in defiance. Her blue-gray eyes, a stark contrast to her brown skin, peer through the large lenses of her glasses. The black woman, somewhere in her 80s, cannot forget what has haunted her family for almost 90 years - though she isn't ready to reveal anything and insists that her name not be used for this article.

"I don't want to talk about that," declares the elder Dennis, her voice shaking.

Four of her ancestors were murdered by a mob, and it's not a topic up for discussion, especially with outsiders.

These days in Newberry, any conversation about that fateful day inspires a variety of responses. Some here hope there would be more recognition of the murders. Others want the whispers about Aug. 19, 1916, to just disappear.

A disappearing act might be an easier wish to grant. Few of

Newberry's residents were alive at the time. Residents in their 70s and 80s pass down the oral history of their parents.

But, throughout this summer, amid a national discussion of the painful reality of America's lynching past, scholars and documentary makers have brought this dark period in U.S. history - when death sentences outside the courts were condoned - back into the public consciousness.

5 found hanged
Lyman Long, 92, lives next to the Pleasant Plain church with his daughter and son-in-law and can still remember some of the aftermath of the lynchings. Although he was only 3 years old in 1916, the images of men riding on white horses to his childhood home still flicker in Long's mind.

The men apparently had come to question his father about a murder.

"The sheriff told my daddy he was looking for Boisey Long," Lyman recalls, recounting the story that was told to him many times in subsequent years. "A good amount of people got killed at that time."

Boisey Long, orphaned as a child, was adopted by members of the community, including the Long and Dennis families, says Lyman Long. During the summer of 1916, Long, in his mid-30s, was accused of being involved in a hog-stealing ring. In an era when farming and raising livestock were the dominant means of survival, a hog was a highly valued possession. Most of the Dennis family members, because of their relationship with Long, apparently were considered suspects.

On Friday, Aug. 18, 1916, Deputy Sheriff George Wynne and Dr. L.G. Harris, a pharmacist in Newberry, paid a 2 a.m. visit to the Dennis home in Jonesville to look for evidence and to serve a warrant, reported the Gainesville Daily Sun on Aug. 21, 1916. Soon after entering the home, the deputy and the pharmacist were shot by Boisey, according to the newspaper account. Boisey Long was then on the run.

Harris survived the shooting, but Wynne was later taken to a Jacksonville hospital via train, only to die before he could receive treatment. Five people, mostly Dennis family members, were arrested later that day, accused of aiding and abetting Boisey in the deputy's shooting death and for allegedly participating in the hog-stealing ring. They were held in the Newberry jail for the night. Jim Dennis never

made it to a jail cell. He was shot to death by a mob while resisting arrest, says the Daily Sun's article.

Mary Dennis and Bert Dennis, siblings of Jim, were among the five arrested. So were Dennis family friends Andrew McHenry and the Reverend Josh J. Baskins. Jim Dennis' sister-in-law, Stella Young, was also among those arrested. Forty-eight hours elapsed while many from Newberry participated in the manhunt for Boisey.

Eventually, Boisey and three accomplices were found and placed in the Newberry jail to await trial.

The Dennis family and their cohorts never received such a trial. Either late Friday night of Aug. 18 or early Saturday morning of the 19th, according to the Daily Sun article, a lynch mob apparently took the Dennises from the Newberry jail. The bodies of the Dennis siblings, McHenry, Baskins and Young were found the next morning, hanged, each on separate oak trees, only 50 feet from the main street into town, according to the article. The Rev. Baskins was in his early 40s, the other four in their early to mid-20s, the Daily Sun reported.

The Hammocks

Today, Newberry hardly reflects its past. Though largely a rural community, it is also a residential refuge for growing numbers of Alachua County residents as Gainesville grows westward. Some of Gainesville's newest and most affluent subdivisions are within a few miles of town.

In town, Newberry's old neighborhoods are more racially diverse than they used to be, says Newberry mayor John Glanzer, although he admits the railroad tracks that go through the heart of town still separate large segments of this community by race.

Gwendolyn Hunt, 66, lives in a predominantly black neighborhood with her husband, Booker. The two of them operate Booker T. Hunt Funeral Home. Their 17-acre property is the site for their business and a few impressive oaks.

The area is called the Hammocks, or Lynch Hammock - a name given to the area since the 1916 lynchings.

Behind Hitchcock's Grocery, a barbecue restaurant, and near the Hammocks Apartments, is a scattering of trees older than most

Newberry residents.

"Oak trees, they stays over 100 years old," Gwendolyn Hunt says, gesturing to the massive trunks and limbs of the two trees that separate the edge of her property from the street. "This is not my land," she says. "It's God's land. It's just been lent to me for a while."

A four-way stop divides the area that was once grassy pasture and pockets of woodland. Hunt and others say this is the area where the five Dennis family members were lynched.

"I'm telling you what they told me," Hunt says, "they said when they hung [Stella Young], the woods lit up (in a spiritual sense)."

Hunt has cataloged Newberry's past in her mind. In 1976, her family moved from Archer to Newberry to open their funeral home. Shortly after, neighbors told her about the area's history.

It was sometime late Friday evening, Aug. 18, and early Saturday morning, Aug. 19, 1916, when the lynch mob reportedly took the Dennis group from the Newberry jail to the Hammocks. At sunrise, passersby could see the silhouettes of five bodies, two of them women, only 50 feet from the town's main street. The Aug. 21, 1916, Gainesville Daily Sun reported thousands from across the state came to view the bodies of the murdered.

No official historical sign explains the significance of this location. Only the sprawling oaks.

'A lot of history'

Patricia Hilliard-Nunn, a Gainesville artist, publisher and filmmaker, organized a memorial service in 2002 to honor the lynching victims. Fifty guests, including some descendents of victims from the Rosewood massacre, 10 miles east of Cedar Key, attended the service held underneath the oaks on the Hunts' property, Hilliard-Nunn says.

Hilliard-Nunn says her research into the lynchings came by accident. As a filmmaker, she wanted to document the history of blacks in Gainesville. And the people she interviewed repeatedly referred back to 1916.

"It kept on coming up," Hilliard-Nunn says.

After editing her current project, Hilliard-Nunn says she wants to create a documentary about the Newberry lynchings.

Hilliard-Nunn has lived in several cities and says she's comfortable in Gainesville, having lived here for 15 years. Although she's come to appreciate Florida's beautiful and rich history, Hilliard-Nunn says she's disturbed by the state's racial record.

"They were dragged kicking and screaming into integration," Nunn says of past Floridians.

She isn't surprised that Florida had the first murder nationally of a civil-rights activist, Harry T. Moore, in 1950. And she doesn't think the Rosewood massacre was out of place in a state that, according to University of Florida professor Jack Davis, had more lynching deaths per number of blacks than any other U.S. state.

But the stories of blacks in Florida are largely unrecorded, Hilliard-Nunn says.

"Our history has been an oral history," she says, "because we've been consciously left out of the history books."

Mrs. Mary talks
Mrs. Daisy died last year, as have other black residents who lived in Newberry in the early 1900s. Gwendolyn Hunt rattles off names of community members.

"Most of the people I could send you to are dead," Hunt says.

There is one exception.

"The only person on this road while I came here was Mrs. Mary," Hunt says of her neighbor.

A few blocks west of the Hunt residence is the trailer home of Mary Welch, a bedridden woman in her 70s who is cared for by family members and the Hunts.

The mobile home is modest. Welch's hospital bed sits in the center of her living room, giving her a good view, both of her front door and the corner TV. She props herself up on a pillow; her physical limitations do not seem to hinder her sharp mind.

"I have nothing to hide," Welch says, giving a sly smile.

As she remembers people and places, the black woman's blue eyes look into the distance. Unlike some of her contemporaries, Welch isn't afraid to talk about the Newberry Six.

Although Welch wasn't alive in 1916, she has been told intimate details of the victims' lives. A story of infidelity. A pregnancy out of wedlock.

The lynch mob, Welch has been told, rounded up the five accused of stealing hogs. And they were willing to victimize more, she says.

"(The Rev. J.J. Baskins) prayed and prayed and prayed that they don't kill his wife," she says.

The mob spared the life of his wife, Betty, but Baskins, Stella Young and three others were slain, and the mob apparently wanted to round up Murray Randolph, one of Young's children, Welch says.

Murray, not yet a teenager, went into hiding for a week in a mining hole so things could "die down," Welch says. Avoiding capture, Murray eventually would be raised by lynching victim Jim Dennis' wife, his Aunt Julia.

Others were murdered during the mob chaos, regardless of alleged involvement in the hog-stealing episode.

"My husband's uncle was killed down there," Welch says.

Dick Johnson was captured by the mob while trying to ride home on his horse and buggy, Welch has been told. Johnson, who was Welch's husband's uncle, carried his savings on him, Welch says. "He never did leave his money at home," she says.

Johnson isn't among those listed as lynching victims in Alachua County. Then again, nationally, experts estimate that hundreds, if not thousands, of deaths by vigilante posses were never recorded.

The 20 lynchings listed in Alachua County records is an untruth, Hilliard-Nunn says.

"For someone to say there were 20 lynchings (here) is dishonest and

disinterested," she says. "To get to the root of that, you can't go by just the traditional records."

Hilliard-Nunn only hopes that elders will tell their stories to their children and grandchildren, so that these generations can document it.

"There's something about this story, even after all these years, that's still painful," Nunn says of the 1916 lynchings. "One of the keys to reconciliation and moving forward is understanding."

She worries aloud that, as time elapses, those individuals with the most information to share will pass away - thus her inspiration for the documentary.

A few villains

The Dennis family descendants won't talk. Newberry City Commissioner Alena Buggs encourages her grandmother, Mable Williams, 98, to recount the 1916 events for the record. But Buggs' grandmother, likely the oldest living black person in Newberry, has reservations about discussing that period, as other blacks do. Lingering fears for their safety still persist.

Many older white residents want modern-day Newberry to close this chapter in its history. Bill Barry is one of those.

Barry, 86, has lived in Newberry his entire life and is familiar with the stories and some of the people involved with the lynchings. Barry's father, William Barry Sr., was a pharmacist and colleague of L.G. Harris, the pharmacist who accompanied Deputy Wynne to arrest Boisey Long. Although Barry says his family never talked to him about the lynchings, he says it still comes up in conversation almost 90 years later.

He'd prefer people look forward to the city's future, not the torments of decades earlier.

"It wasn't a community mishap," Barry says about the lynchings. "It was done by a few people."

The lynchings weren't initially condemned. Rather, hundreds of people were involved in the mob that night, and some 3,000 people traveled from near and far to see the five bodies still hanging from the oaks, accordingto an article in the Nov. 6, 1977, Gainesville Sun.

"Some of (Newberry's) redneck image is derived from the incident," Barry says. "At least people in my generation and younger regretted it."

Barry sways in the wicker rocker in his home's Florida room. He considers himself a local historian of sorts, although, like his father, a pharmacist by training. He talks slowly, emphasizing the syllables of each word, as if his speech will help paint a picture of scenes in Newberry's past.

"It was a closely knit community," Barry says of the town's early history.

It was Barry's father, William Barry Sr., who was quoted in the Nov. 6, 1977, Sun: "I'm sure more white citizens would agree now that, back then, many white people believed that a (black person) didn't have a soul. They were mistreated. It was a terrible thing. As far as this community and its history go, that was probably our worst day."

Whites were
lynched, as well

The late 1800s brought farming families, many from South Carolina, to Alachua County. The Hailes, Chestnuts and Dudleys were South Carolinians and the first prominent families in the county. Before mining came to Newberry, the operations on the Dudley farm, a few miles south in Jonesville, were the area's largest industry. But the mining of phosphate and limestone at the turn of the century changed the feel and demography of Newberry. It was not a sleepy farming community any longer.

As miners arrived in search of work, the town gained a growing population of single men; Newberry in those days could be a tough place, says Bill Barry Jr.

Out of the 20 lynching victims on record for Alachua County between 1891 to 1926, five of the victims were white, an indication that lynchings were considered a legitimate form of justice for everyone, not only blacks.

The Great Depression forced many mining families to leave the area. Some of Newberry's oldest families have moved elsewhere, including the descendents of pharmacist L.G. Harris, who now live in Clearwater, says Barry.

But it's not only historical accounts that give a sense of the Newberry of 1916. The area's history lives on, at least on one farm. The Dudley Farm Historic State Park is considered a living exhibit, a walk-through of Florida's Cracker era. The 325-acre site was left to the Florida Park Service by Myrtle Dudley, who was born on the farm and lived there until her death.

The Dudleys

Sally Morrison has worked on the farm for 16 years, her office nestled in the back of the log cabin welcome center. Inside is the park's museum outlining the contribution of the Dudleys to the area.

Prominently displayed are references to African-American labor, which helped the farm succeed.

"The Dudley farm was larger than the city of Gainesville," Morrison says, pointing to an 1870s map in the visitor's cabin.

The Dudley family was the area's second largest employer once phosphate mining came to Newberry, and the Dudleys hired many black laborers to tend the farm.

Lyman Long once worked for the Dudley Farm as a sharecropper. And so did many in the black community, a number of whom lived in Jonesville at that time.

Although the "community of Dudley" - as it was called - provided great economic support for Newberry, the Dudleys' relationship with blacks apparently was strained by the 1916 lynchings.

For one thing, Deputy Sheriff George Wynne, allegedly shot and killed by Boisey Long, was the brother of Fannie Dudley, the family matriarch.

In a 1977 article in The Gainesville Sun about the lynchings, Frank Dudley, Fannie's son, recounted the period. He was 16 years old in 1916.

"There was a great stir up in the neighborhood," he said. "There might have been 1,500 white folks going through the woods around here lookin' for Boisey Long."

Frank Dudley wouldn't say if he was among the lynch mob but did say

he rode among the crowds going through the community.

Dudley told The Sun that "the very best people who lived in this neighborhood" participated in the murders, "law-abiding citizens who wouldn't hurt a kitten under different circumstances.'"

Dudley called the alleged hog-stealing ring "the biggest problem we had around here back then, and the neighbors made up their minds that they were either going to run them (black people) out or burn them out."

In the 1977 article, Frank Dudley told The Sun in detail how "one at a time, a (black person) was placed on the horse with the rope around the neck" and "then the horse was slapped away and they was hanged." Dudley said that even a state senator witnessed the lynchings.

Frank Dudley died in 1980.

In "Dudley Farm, a History of Florida Farm Life," written by Ben Pickard with help from Sally Morrison, one chapter of the book is devoted to the lynchings. It mentions that blacks apparently sought the refuge and influence of Fannie Dudley when the chaos occurred, hoping she could protect some community members.

It'll take generations

Like Gwendolyn Hunt, John Glanzer isn't a Newberry native. The city's current mayor moved to Newberry during the mid-'70s and, throughout the years, has also heard the stories of vigilantism in this area's past. Glazer says that one older resident once told him that he and his friends, as young adults in the 1920s, had detonated dynamite in the cemetery of a black church in Alachua while a church service was taking place. The men didn't destroy the cemetery; they just wanted to scare the parishioners, Glanzer says he was told.

"That was the reality back then," Glanzer says.

Race relations have improved dramatically over the decades. By 1972, Newberry had elected its first black commissioner. Today the Newberry City Commission is a closer reflection of the racial and gender makeup of the citizenry it represents: Two white women, one African American woman, one Native American woman, and two white men.

Racism still persists, Glanzer says. "It will take generations for those types of attitudes to die out," he says.

Late justice

At Boisey Long's trial, less than a month after the lynchings, a jury sentenced him to death. Long was legally hanged less than a month later. The day before Long was convicted, a grand jury investigating the lynchings issued a statement condemning the mass murders that occurred as a result of Long's shooting of the deputy and pharmacist.

"We, the grand jurors . . . deplore the acts of violence that have recently been committed in our county, and wish to assure the court that we have diligently sought the testimony and fully investigated with a view of ascertaining the guilty parties, but from the evidence before us have been unable to fix guilt. . .

"We commend that in the future the law be upheld in our county instead of violated, and that the people . . . refrain from acts of violence. . ."

No one was ever arrested for the murders of the Newberry Six.

Ron Sachs, a University of Florida graduate and former editor of The Independent Florida Alligator, was 26 when he wrote the 1977 Gainesville Sun article about the murders. Now the president of his own media firm in Tallahassee, Sachs remembers how difficult it was to get anyone to speak on record. He says he wishes more inquiry would go into this chapter of Florida's past - although he concedes the difficulty of the task. Today, just as in 1977, most who witnessed the tragedy are no longer alive.

"It's a dark chapter in Florida history that really goes unnoticed," Sachs says.

A few pages in books and newspapers tell a partial story of the Newberry Six. Three legible headstones for James Dennis, Andrew McHenry and the Rev. J.J. Baskins in the cemetery behind Pleasant Plain church in Jonesville are the only physical reminders of the tragedy. Other gravestones nearby, their inscriptions worn smooth, may or may not be those of Stella Young, Mary Dennis and Bert Dennis.

"We live in a society that has failed to address the failings of its own

history," Sachs says.

This, he says, isn't just important for the record but also for those lynching victims.

"To address this is doing justice for the murdered who never received theirs."

Claudia Adrien is a University of Florida student majoring in history. She spent the summer working on this project as an intern for The Gainesville Sun.