

Series Puts Cold Cases on Front Burner

'Murder' Seeks Justice for Victims Of Jim Crow Era

By Ellen Maguire
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On July 25, 1946, in the clear light of day, two young black couples were slain at an isolated bridge near Monroe, Ga. Roger and Dorothy Malcom and George W. and Mae Dorsey, sharecroppers all, were shot about 60 times at close range by a group of white men who didn't bother to disguise themselves.

The gruesome killings drew the condemnation of President Harry S. Truman and a five-month inquiry from the Federal Bureau of Investigation. But despite the testimony of 100 witnesses, a nearly all-white grand jury in Georgia declined to indict a single suspect on murder charges.

Some of those murder suspects are still alive, however, and their prosecution is the ambitious goal of "Moore's Ford Bridge," the first installment of "Murder in Black and White," an hour-long documentary television series airing four consecutive nights on TV One. (The series, which debuted last night, continues tonight. The first episode will be telecast again at 10 p.m. Thursday.)

Executive producer and director Keith A. Beauchamp describes the project, his first television venture, as "part 'Unsolved Mysteries,' part 'America's Most Wanted.' "

"Let me tell you, I'm more interested in justice than I am in filmmaking," says Beauchamp, 37, who aims to collect fresh evidence with the help of television viewers -- and the FBI.

Beauchamp's research for his 2005 documentary feature film, "The Untold Story of Emmett Louis Till," unearthed vital new information that led to the FBI reopening of Till's case. Till, a black teenager, was killed in Mississippi in 1955. A white woman had accused him of flirting with her.

FBI Special Agent Dale Killinger, speaking by phone, calls the filmmaker's spirit of teamwork "an ideal template for future investigations." Beauchamp, though, says there is another, more delicate reason why his new television program might prove effective.

"Look, black people don't usually want to talk to the FBI," he says, also by phone, from his office in Brooklyn. "In the Till case, I would win the confidence of the witnesses, then act as intermediary. That's what I'll be doing here."

Till's case remains unsolved, but two weeks ago, the Senate passed the Emmett Till Unsolved Civil Rights Crime Act (HR 923) by unanimous consent. If it is signed by President Bush, the legislation will provide \$13.5 million for the investigation of unsolved civil-rights-era slayings.

For Beauchamp, the groundswell of government attention is gratifying; his program was created with the help of the FBI's Cold Case Initiative, which was first announced last year. But he laments the fact that many of the witnesses in the decades-old crimes have died, and that the remaining ones -- often silenced by shame or a deeply entrenched fear of retribution -- represent the rapidly diminishing chances to convict the killers.

He draws inspiration, though, from Edgar Ray Killen's 2005 manslaughter conviction in the killing of three civil-rights workers in 1964, as well as from a grass-roots community of "crime-fighting citizens" such as activist Bobby Howard of the "Moore's Ford Bridge" case.

Howard, a Georgia native who lives 20 miles from the site of the slayings in that case, has steadfastly pursued the killers since 1967 -- when he first saw photographs of the four horrifically mutilated corpses. On-screen, Howard, 66, quietly details the fear that has paralyzed his community. "I've seen old black men cry when they describe their lives," he says by phone from his home.

When asked to characterize a life lived near the murder suspects, Howard sighs. "Somewhere along the line, I deliberately put myself in the path of those people," he says. "I wanted to know -- well, does a person look different who does something like that? But they don't. They look just like ordinary people."

Dramatizations of those ordinary people populate each segment of Beauchamp's series. Reenactments of an unsolved case -- accompanied by interviews with historians, activists and law enforcement officials -- are designed to stir memories and galvanize attention. Relatives of the slain men and women also appear on-screen, providing a measure of their painful legacies.

On the day of the "Moore's Ford Bridge" killings, J. Loy Harrison, a white landowner, personally posted bail for Roger Malcom, who had been jailed for stabbing his white employer. Harrison then offered to drive the Malcoms and the Dorseys to his farm.

Maybe Harrison was planning to employ the two couples as sharecroppers, Beauchamp suggests, or maybe he was abetting the slayings. Harrison chose a backcountry route home, past Moore's Ford Bridge. There, the group of white men pulled the two young couples from Harrison's vehicle.

Exactly what happened next is the subject of much debate. "Even our memories are segregated," says author Laura Wexler, who documented the case in her 2003 book, "Fire in a Canebrake: The Last Mass Lynching in America," and who appears in the program.

This much becomes clear: Tensions were running high in Georgia that summer, due in part to Eugene Talmadge. The recently elected governor, who visited Monroe shortly before the slayings, openly endorsed violent acts of intimidation against African American voters. By phone from Baltimore, Wexler characterizes Talmadge's campaign as: "Vote for me, and I'll make sure that blacks stay in their place."

On-screen, investigative reporter Jerry Mitchell, a Pulitzer Prize finalist, points out a particularly painful irony: George Dorsey, a World War II veteran, had risked his life to help eradicate bigotry in Europe -- only to die at the hands of his countrymen.

Glimpses of progress are rendered naive by hindsight. Archival footage shows President Truman addressing a gathering of the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People on the Mall. "It is my deep conviction," Truman says, "that we have reached a turning point in the long history of our country's efforts to guarantee freedom and equality to all our citizens."

The "Moore's Ford Bridge" installment ends with the host, the Rev. Al Sharpton, mentioning the victims in the three other cold cases in the series: Lamar Smith, Willie Edwards and the Rev. George Lee.

Taking his cue from community organizers such as Smith and Lee, who registered black voters in 1955, Beauchamp urges young audience members "to grab their video cameras and go talk to their grandparents."

"If we can't catch these murderers," Beauchamp says, "they should go to their graves terrified that we might."

Murder in Black and White (two hours) continues tonight at 10 on TV One.

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