Repairing Senate’s Record on Lynching

‘Long Overdue’ Apology Would Be Congress’s First for Treatment of Blacks

By AVIS THOMAS-LESTER
Washington Post Staff Writer

Anna Holmes remembers hearing about the bridge when she was a little girl.

It stood somewhere near the spot where the Collington and Western branches of the Patuxent River met in Upper Marlboro, less than a quarter-mile from the Marlboro jail.

"I used to hear them talking about the lynchings," said Holmes, 79, who grew up in central Prince George’s County.

It was on the bridge that a black man named Stephen Williams, accused of manhandling a white woman, was beaten and hanged about 3 in the morning on Oct. 20, 1894. A masked mob snatched him from his jail cell and dragged him as he pleaded for his life.

“When the Marlboro bridge was reached the rope was quickly tied to the ralling and amid piteous groans Williams was hurled into eternity,” The Washington Post reported.

At the time, there was no federal law against lynching, and most states refused to prosecute white men for killing black people. The U.S. House of Representatives, responding to pleas from presidents and civil rights groups, three times agreed to make the crime a federal offense. Each time, though, the measure died in the Senate at the hands of powerful southern lawmakers using the filibuster.

The Senate is set to correct that wrong Monday, when its members will vote on a resolution to apologize for the failure to enact an anti-lynching law first proposed 105 years ago.

“The apology is long overdue," said Sen. George Allen (R-Va.), who is sponsoring the resolution with Sen. Mary Landrieu (D-La.). “Our history does include times when we failed to protect individual freedom and rights.”

The Senate’s action comes amid a series of conciliatory efforts nationwide that include reopening investigations and prosecutions in Mississippi. Advocates say the vote

See LYNCHING, A8, Col. 1
Senate Poised to Apologize for Lack of Anti-Lynching Law

LYNCHING, From A1

would mark the first time Congress has apologized for the nation’s treatment of African Americans.

Allen’s involvement could help mend his rift with black Virginians who criticized him for hanging a noose outside his law office, displaying a Confederate flag in his home and proclaiming a Confederate History Month while governor.

Landrieu said she was motivated to propose the bill after seeing the book “Without Sanctuary: Lynchings in America,” a collection of postcards taken at lynching scenes.

“The intensity and impact of the pictures tell a story...that written words failed to convey,” Landrieu said. “It has been an extremely emotional, educational experience for me. And the more I learned, the more sure I became [about] the effort to pass this resolution.”

Haunting History

Towns across America bear reminders of the shameful tradition that claimed 4,743 lives between 1882 and 1968, research shows. In Alexandria, a lamppost at Cameron and Lee streets served to Lynch Josephine McCoy on April 23, 1897. In Annopolis, a bluff near College Creek was the site of Henry Davis’ lynching four days before Christmas in 1906.

Lynching also remains imbedded in the consciousness of African American families, some of whom can name an ancestor or a friend who fell prey to mob justice, often meted out with spectators watching and memorialized with postcards of the victims hanging or pieces of the ropes that had snapped their necks.

Billie Holiday’s best-selling recording, “Strange Fruit,” was about lynching. Dozens of black writers, including poets Langston Hughes and Gwendolyn Brooks, have written about it.

Locally, Rep. Albert R. Wynn (D-Md.), 53, remembers his mother warning him about the lynching tree in their small town in North Carolina. Fred Tutman of Upper Marlboro can point to a tree on his family’s land, a previous owner used for lynching.

“The memories are less vivid for me because of my generation,” said Tutman. “There are more vivid stories for my mother and grandmother, who grew up in Prince George’s and had all kinds of violence perpetrated on them.”

Rep. John Lewis (D-Ga.) said he was most affected by the death of 14-year-old Emmett Till, who was brutally tortured and shot in Mississippi in 1955. Lewis was 15 at the time.

ings, lynching is more broadly defined as mob terrorism to avenge a crime or wrong and a method of intimidation. The goal, historians say, was not just to maim and kill, but to humiliate and dehumanize. Before they were shot or hanged, some victims had their eyes gouged out or their teeth pulled with pliers, and some were beaten, burned at the stake, dismembered or castrated.

“It was truly the American holocaust,” said Mark D. Plummer, counsel for the Committee for a Formal Apology, which lobbied the Senate. “There are these perceptions that lynching was carried out on some poor souls who were dragged into the woods. But these were public spectacles. The civic fathers and leaders of the community often participated in these things, directly or indirectly.”

Mobs killings were often carnival-like events, attended by men, women and children who were not afraid of facing legal consequences, said Lawrence Guyot, 66, a Washington

NAACP and B’nai B’rith’s Anti-Defamation League, sprang up in part to counter lynching. Black journalist Ida B. Wells-Barnett devoted her career to ending lynching. Seven presidents, starting with Benjamin Harrison in 1891, argued for making it a federal offense.

None of this swayed the Senate, where southern lawmakers insisted that a federal law would intrude on states’ rights. One debate tied up the Senate for a total of six weeks in 1937 and 1938, and supporters were never able to break the filibuster.

If the Senate had acted years ago, Allen said, “it would have sent a signal” that the government did not condone lynching. “If leaders are quiet, there is a sense in the general population that this sort of violent, vile behavior or conduct is acceptable,” he said.

A Heavy Toll

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>In the D.C. region:</th>
<th>States with the highest number of lynchings:</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>MARYLAND: 29</td>
<td>MISSISSIPPI: 581</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>27 blacks, 2 non-blacks</td>
<td>GEORGIA: 531</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>VIRGINIA: 100</td>
<td>TEXAS: 493</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>83 blacks, 17 non-blacks</td>
<td>LOUISIANA: 391</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>WEST VIRGINIA: 48</td>
<td>ALABAMA: 347</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>26 blacks, 20 non-blacks</td>
<td>RHODE ISLAND: 395</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>THE DISTRICT: not available</td>
<td>MASSACHUSETTS: 390</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>RHODE ISLAND: 395</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>NEW HAMPSHIRE: 347</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>VERMONT: 347</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Before the ancestors of Fred Tutman bought property in Upper Marlboro, lynchings occurred at this tree.

BY MARVIN JOSEPH — THE WASHINGTON POST

A First for Congress

The current effort to secure an apology was born out of a broader movement to ask Congress to acknowledge wrongs toward African Americans, including slavery, Planning said.

“This would be the first time in history that Congress has apologized for past historical crimes against African Americans,” said Planning, adding that the Senate has apologized to Native Americans, Japanese Americans and other groups.

Under the auspices of the Committee for a Formal Apology, activist Dick Gregory and others mailed copies of the book “Without Sanctuary” to senators. The crude images helped bring home the horror to some legislators who had given little
Lack of Anti-Lynching Law

BY MARK JOSEPH — THE WASHINGTON POST

Marlboro, lynchings occurred at this tree.

thought to lynching, Planning said.

One postcard, depicting a corpse in 1910, read: "This is a token of a great day we had in Dallas March 3." Another, showing the burnt corpse of William Stanley in Temple, Tex., in 1915, read: "This is the barbecue we had last night... your son Joe." Allen and Landrieu agreed to lead the effort and have gained more than 50 co-sponsors.

Landrieu said she wants the measure discussed on the Senate floor before the vote in the Congressional Record and counter the hateful comments from the past. Before the vote Monday evening, descendants of lynching victims have been invited to a special day of events on Capitol Hill.

Guyot, who worked to overturn Jim Crow laws in the 1960s, said the legislation fits a pattern of efforts across the country. They include the FBI's reopening of the investigation into Till's lynching and the prosecution of suspected Ku Klux Klansman Edgar Ray Killen in the 1964 slaying of civil rights workers James Chaney, Andrew Goodman and Michael Schwerner. That trial is set to start Monday.

"There is no statute of limitations on murder and no statute of limitations on doing what is right," Guyot said. "This is a time in American history when not only is it possible to have coalitions across racial lines, but also necessary. Reconciliation is needed to make that happen."

Janet Langhart Cohen, wife of former senator and defense secretary William S. Cohen and a member of the apology committee, said the Senate should have acted unsolicited.

"It's all I can do to repress my rage that we have to ask them, in the name of decency, to say you are sorry," said Langhart Cohen, who lives in Chevy Chase.

She grew up hearing stories about the lynching of her cousin, Jimmy Gillenwaters, near Bowling Green, Ky., in 1912. In her book "From Rage to Real Life: My Life in Two Americas" and in a recent interview, she recalled how her grandmother and uncles repeated the story for years, recounting every detail.

Gillenwaters, 17, was the oldest of three children raised on a farm owned by Langhart Cohen's grandfather. As landowners, her grandparents said they were always keenly aware of the danger their success posed because of jealous neighbors.

"One night the night riders came to scare them — that's what they did in those days. They would ride by, set fire to a house or shoot," Langhart Cohen said. "After the shots stopped, they thought everyone was accounted for."

The next morning, they noticed that Jimmy was gone, and my Aunt Bertha went to look for him. Finally, they heard a blood-curdling scream. When they found her, Aunt Bertha was holding on to his ankles, screaming. They killed Jimmy! They killed Jimmy! Help me get, my son down!"

A Senate apology, Langhart Cohen said, couldn't erase her family's bitter memories, but it could help improve the nation's image abroad as it pushes for human rights improvements.

"How can we promote democracy," she said, "then say that we are over there to liberate people from dictatorships when we don't even acknowledge what happened here?"

Staff researchers Karl Eusanio and Don Pohlm an contributed to this report.
who grew up in Prince George's and had all kinds of violence perpetrated on them."

Rep. John Lewis (D-Ga.) said he was most affected by the death of 14-year-old Emmett Till, who was brutally tortured and shot in Mississippi in 1955. Lewis was 15 at the time. "I remembered thinking that it could happen to anyone, me or my brothers or my cousins," said Lewis, a civil rights activist. "It created a sense of fear that it could happen to anyone who got out of line."

Lynching touched all races and religions and occurred in all states in the contiguous United States except for four in New England. Immigrants were frequent targets, so much so that at the beginning of the 20th century, the State Department paid nearly $500,000 to China, Italy, and Mexico on behalf of lynching victims.

But the practice was predominant in the South, and four out of five victims were black, according to statistics compiled by Tuskegee University in Alabama.

While some were crime suspects, many had not been accused of anything more than talking back to a white man or looking at a white woman. Black landowners were frequent targets, historians say.

Typically associated with hangings, the 75 Years Later, Scars Linger

James Cameron can still recall the feel of the rope around his neck. It was after sundown on Aug. 7, 1930, in Marion, Ind. The day before, Cameron, then 16, had been arrested with two friends and charged with robbing a white couple at a livery stable, then killing the man. In 1989, Deeter, 23, charged with Público was said to be raped, but she later denied it.

After the men were arrested, a mob broke into the jail, beat them, dragged them to the town square and hung Thomas Shinbrot, 18, and Abram Smith, 19. Cameron, who was the last to be dragged out, said he was put in a rope and thrown over his head: "Lord, forgive me my sins."

Cameron, now 91, is the only living survivor of a lynching known to historians. As the 75th anniversary of his ordeal approaches, he can still remember some of the faces of the 2,000 white people who gathered there. Some had brought their children. Some were eating. A photographer snapped pictures.

As the noose tightened, someone spoke, "Take this boy back. He had nothing to do with any killing or rape."

"Cameron recalled a person saying. He was returned to the jail and later sentenced to prison for robbery. He owns a piece of the rope that scarred his neck."

Carl Deeter, 70, a nephew of the murder victim, said the episode haunted his family as well. His grandparents told the sheriff they didn't want a lynching, said Deeter, who was born five years later. The sheriff, the fire chief and the mayor all pledged to maintain order but stood by as the mob took over.

Four years later, Deeter's grandparents appealed to the parole board to release Cameron from jail. Last year, Cameron and Deeter met at a gathering called by 25 Marion ministers in the square where the lynching took place.

Both men said they believe the U.S. Senate should apologize for its failure to enact anti-lynching legislation. Cameron, who opened a museum in Milwaukee about violence against African Americans, will be at the Capitol on Monday when the Senate votes.

"I think they should pass the law, but it's not going to help," Cameron said in an interview. "If you let someone with a gun, but you apologize... he's still hurt. It's a good idea, but it's too late."

— Avis Thomas-Lester