the Man the Martyr the Mystery

HARRY T. MOORE

by David Kennedy

Harry Tyson Moore wrote his last letter of protest on Dec. 2, 1951. He fought for 17 years to achieve equality between blacks and whites, becoming the most hated black man in Florida.

In his letter, Moore demanded justice for four young black men accused of rape. He recommended Governor Fuller Warren not "whitewash" the then-famous Groveland case, which ignited a period of racial violence in Florida that the Northern press dubbed the "Florida Terror."

A whirlwind of racial tension surrounded the case, which included alleged beatings, murder, a vigilante mob and two separate trials. He closed his letter saying, "We seek no special favors; but certainly we have a right to expect justice and equal protection of the laws even for the humblest Negro. Shall we be disappointed again?"

Three weeks after Moore wrote his appeal to Governor Warren, he celebrated Christmas with his family in the tiny town of Mims. Moore, his wife Harriette, daughter Peaches and mother Rosa returned home from his brother-in-law's house around 9 p.m. The couple's other daughter, Evangeline, would arrive in the morning by train from Washington, D.C. They would then open the gifts under the tree.

Before heading to bed, the family shared a fruitcake to commemorate Harry and Harriette's 25th wedding anniversary. It was a quiet celebration in the modest wood-frame home surrounded by an orange grove.

But at 10:20 p.m., with all asleep, the quiet ceased.

A bomb exploded under Harry Moore's house, directly beneath his bed. The blast burst with such power that he and his wife flew up to the ceiling. Harry died on the way to the hospital. Harriette passed on one day after Harry's funeral. After three separate investigations spanning 40 years, the murders remain unsolved.

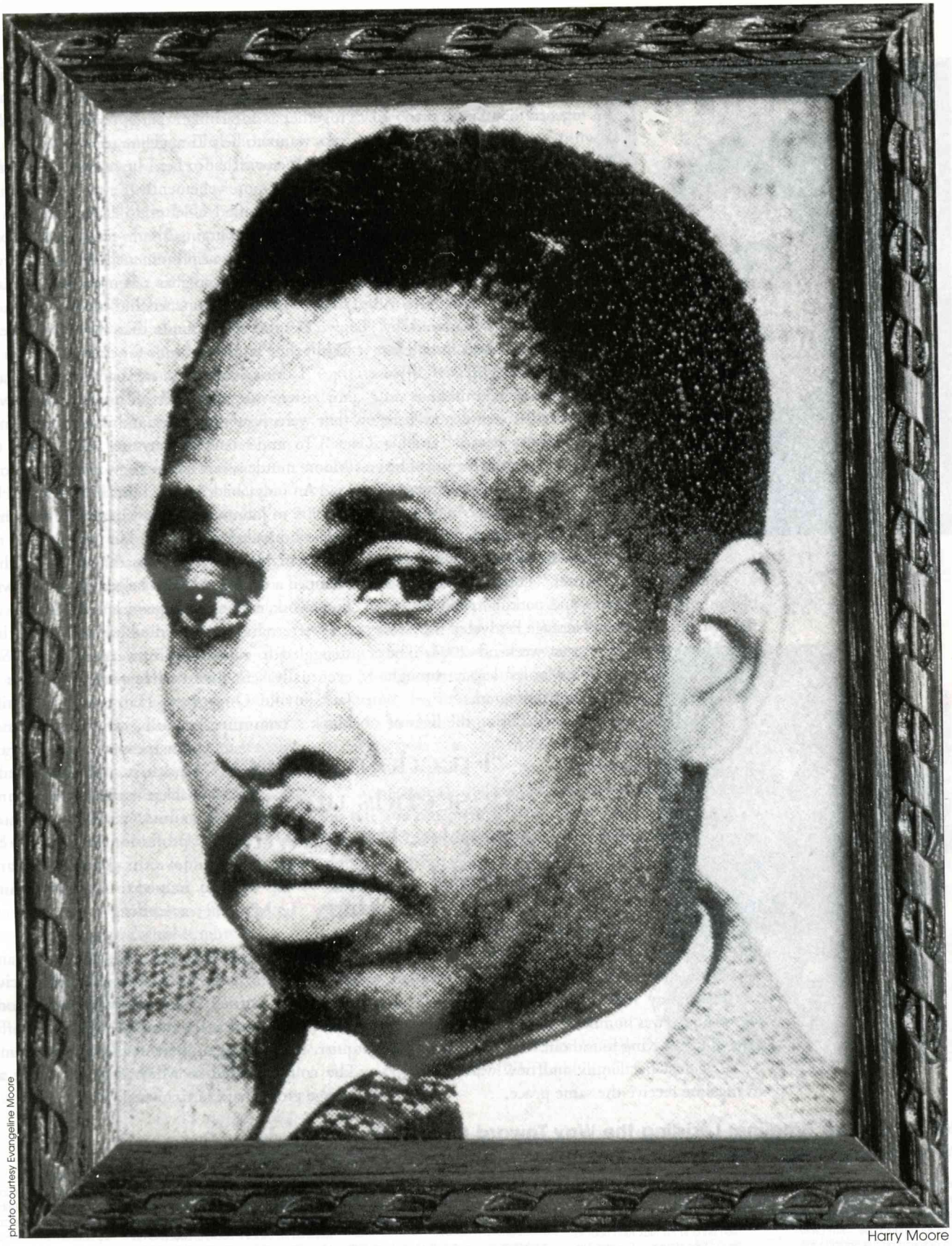

photo courtesy Evangeline Moore

Harry Moore

On that Christmas night in Mims, Harry T. Moore became the first civil rights leader assassinated in the United States. Despite the mysterious murders and an enormous scope of work he left behind, Harry Moore remains lost in the civil rights movement of the 1950s and 1960s. His work preceded names like Martin Luther King, Jr., Rosa Parks and Emmett

Moore crusaded during the 1930s and 1940s when fighting for justice while entrenched in the Jim Crow world of injustice was unheard of. Now, the Moores' surviving daughter, Evangeline, hopes to build upon some recent recognition of her parents and bring a resolution to a fight for justice that has lasted far beyond their deaths. In the coming year she will see the opening of a park

photo courtesy Evangeline Moore

Harriette Moore

She also is pushing to have the unsolved murders opened for a fourth time.

More than 50 years after the murders of Harry T. Moore and his wife, recognition of their sacrifice is on the rise. Ben Green, a Tallahassee-based scholar, published a biography on Moore in 1999. A documentary narrated by Ossie Davis and Ruby Dee aired on PBS in 2001. Two government buildings in Brevard County now bare Moore's name, and a monument at the site of his home in Mims will open in April. It will include a cultural center, replica of the house and picnic areas.

The cultural center, complete with a playground, picnic area and parking, will open at the first annual Moore Heritage Festival of the Arts and Humanities on Easter weekend 2004. The festival will celebrate the Moores' legacy through various events and educational programs.

Festival organizers want to bring the lives of the Moore's to light. They can only hope people learn the same lessons Harry's daughter has. Like him, Evangeline Moore has a passion for justice.

"I despise and actually hate injustices," she says.

That core belief fuels her next quest.

Evangeline now lives in Maryland, less than 10 miles away from a former Florida resident whose house was bombed in Jacksonville in 1963. Iona Godfrey King found out who committed the crime against her family and now wants to help Evangeline receive the same peace.

The two women met when Clennon King, an alternative school teacher, brought them together as a learning experience for his class. He, too, wants to help Evangeline receive justice.

"We owe that to her," he repeats three times, each time more vehemently.

Iona drafted a letter to President Bush in February 2003, urging him to re-open the Moore case again. Now, a prominent New York lawyer, Elizabeth Holtzman, has taken on the case and hopes to have it re-opened and solved.

Despite the wounds that this quest opens, Evangeline has her reasons for continuing.

"I think I owe it to my parents, myself and my sister," she says. "We all need to know who they were, how they did it and why they did it."

To understand the mystery surrounding the Moore murders, one has to know Harry T. Moore.

An only child, he was born in Houston, Fla., in 1905 to Johnny and Rosa Moore. He was a frail boy who failed in sports, but excelled in the classroom. He once solved a math problem that had stumped a teacher. He also helped classmates with homework, earning him the nickname "Doc."

After his father died, Harry's mother struggled to raise the nine-year-old alone. She eventually sent him to live with her sisters in Jacksonville. Once there, Harry absorbed a rich black community full of black-owned businesses, a vibrant culture and intellectual achievement. His three aunts, all educated professionals, nurtured his love of knowledge and helped to shape his future, according to Green, Moore's biographer.

> "Freedom never descends upon a people. It is always bought with a price."
> -Harry T. Moore

Moore would go on to work as a teacher and principal before becoming involved with civil rights. He married Harriette Vyda Simms soon after taking his first teaching job. She would offer quiet, unwavering support in the years to come. The couple settled in Mims surrounded by an orange grove that Harry owned.

Harry T. Moore Timeline: Leading the Way Toward Civil Rights

(Partial timeline taken from the *Freedom Never Dies* website at www.pbs.org/harrymoore)

Plessy v. Ferguson Decision, 1896: The U.S. Supreme Court rules that "separate but equal" is constitutional in this landmark case. "Jim Crow" laws descend on the South in the following years.

NAACP Birth, Feb. 12, 1909 The NAACP was formed by 47 whites and six blacks on Abraham Lincoln's birthday. The group aimed to fight for civil and political liberty.

The KKK Reborn, November, 1915 William J. Simmons and 34 other men bring to Ku Klux Klan back to life in Stone Mountain, Georgia. The modern KKK is born.

"The Long Bloody Summer," May to July, 1919 Race riots flare up in Charleston, S.C., Longview, TX, Washington, D.C. and Chicago, IL.

Scottsboro, April 1931 Police arrest nine black teenage boys for raping two white woman near Scottsboro, AL. Eight of the boys received death sentences in a case that would have both legal and political ramifications.

Brevard County NAACP, 1934 Harry T. Moore organizes the Brevard County NAACP.

Fight for Equal Salaries Begins, Dec. 8, 1936 The NAACP and attorney Thurgood Marshall file *Gibbs v. Board of Education* in Montgomery County Maryland. It was the first attempt to equalize the salaries of black and white teachers.

Moore Begins Fight in South, March, 1938 Harry T. Moore files *Gilbert v. Board of Public Instruction*. This suit became the first filed in the South in order to equalize black and white teacher salaries.

Gilbert Suit Fails, July 25, 1939 The Florida Supreme Court rules against the Gilbert case saying that the state constitution did not require school boards to establish a salary schedule.

The Moore's youngest daughter remembers the man who would find the courage to challenge the unchangeable. Evangeline Moore worshiped her father, following him everywhere. She always wanted to be with him.

"I just adored him," she says. "I always felt very safe when he was around."

She felt safe because of his calm and patient demeanor. The religious-minded man never smoked, drank or even raised his voice. He had such a quiet voice that Evangeline often spoke for him at engagements. He approached his goals with unswayable determination, never allowing his foes or obstacles to rattle him.

"He was a strong person and yet very gentle," Evangeline says.

Frank Williams, Moore's mentor, believed his calmness set him apart.

"He was so calm and collected and so that's what made people more angry," he says in the documentary *Freedom Never Dies: The Legacy of Harry T. Moore*.

People angered easily. After all, Harry Moore's countless letters landed in the hands of politicians and community leaders who were amazed that a black man wrote them. With an eloquent, persuasive and engaging style, Moore insisted that men who held positions of power do something to confront the unequal treatment of blacks. That constant mission was not just Moore's, but that of his whole family.

On Sundays the family climbed into a Model A Ford and traveled the back roads of Florida to investigate, organize and push for civil rights.

"When one person left the house for a meeting, four of us went," Evangeline says.

The family, especially Harriette, gave Harry a strong support system upon which he relied. Moore needed that support, for his life was never far from danger.

His steady pursuit of justice and equality made him a target for terror.

Evangeline recalls the fear she felt when cars often tailed the family at night on their weekend trips. Her father even resorted to carrying a pistol in the glove compartment.

"I'll take a few of them with me if it comes to that," he told his family.

Rosa feared her son's work would cost him his life—rightfully so. Florida owned a history of violence against blacks, and the state had the highest per capita rate of lynchings from 1900 to 1930. After the Groveland riot in 1949, the violence in Florida built steadily. Racial incidents flared up across the state resulting in one lynching, one shooting, two beatings and 11 bombings.

On the night Moore died, Rosa had asked him to halt his crusade. But in the face of violence, Harry Moore refused his mother's request.

"Every advancement comes by way of sacrifice," he told her. "What I am doing is for the benefit of my race."

Moore never hesitated in his quest for justice, because he believed that his mission was one from God.

"It was a spiritual thing," Evangeline explains.

Some people believe Moore knew his fate and accepted it.

"He knew exactly what he was doing," says Jim Clark, a historian at the University of Central Florida. "He was willing to give his life."

The world heard the bomb that took the lives of Harry and Harriette Moore. Newspapers on every continent covered the event and editorialized about it. Communists used it as propaganda. Eleanor Roosevelt feared the worst about the 12th bombing in Florida in 1951.

photo courtesy Evangeline Moore

The Moore family, circa early 1930s

photo courtesy Evangeline Moore

Harry Moore in the grove, which surrounded his house

Florida State Conference, 1941
Harry T. Moore organizes the Florida State Conference of the NAACP

Executive Order 8802, June 25, 1941
President Roosevelt issues Executive Order 8802 after A. Philip Randolph threatens to march on Washington. The order prohibited discrimination in war industries. Randolph called off the march.

CORE Formed, 1943
The Congress of Racial Equality (CORE) forms. The group would become

Harrison Lynching, June 16, 1943
Cellos Harrison is lynched in Marianna, FL. Harry T. Moore writes a letter of protest to Governor Spessard Holland.

Howard Lynching, March 12, 1944
Harry T. Moore personally investigates the lynching of Willie

***Smith v. Allwright* Decision, April 3, 1944**
U.S. Supreme Court finds that "lily-white" primaries are unconstitutional in the *Smith v. Allwright* case.

PVL Formed, Aug. 31, 1944
Harry T. Moore organizes the Progressive Voters' League.

Moores Fired, June 6, 1946
The Brevard County School Board fires Harry and Harriette Moore as teachers because of Harry's political activities.

Moore Moves On, June 28, 1946
Harry T. Moore becomes the secretary of the Florida State Conference of the NAACP, a full-time, paid position.

"That kind of violent incident will be spread all over every country in the world and the harm it will do us among the people of the world is untold," she said.

Harry and Harriette Moore are the only couple to lose their lives in the struggle for civil rights, yet they remain ignored by history. No television cameras chronicled Harry's mission, so exposure was limited until after his death. Then the Florida civil rights movement lost momentum. Today, most historians consider the 1954 U.S. Supreme Court case of *Brown v. Board of Education* as the starting point for the modern civil rights movement.

"It's a terrible mistake," Clark says.

Along with other experts, he believes the movement for racial equality has roots that predate the Brown decision. Students studying American History will not find Moore's name in their textbooks nor will visitors to the Civil Rights Memorial in Montgomery, Alabama, find his name etched in the granite.

"It's amazing to wonder if he'd been a few years later and in a different place, would he be a civil rights champion," Clark says.

History may ignore Harry T. Moore, but some believe his work broke new ground.

"We consider the work of Harry and Harriette Moore very important in laying the groundwork in the modern civil rights movement," says Bill Gary of the North Brevard National Association for the Advancement of Colored People.

By the time Moore mailed his last letter, he had fought inequality for almost two decades. The pioneering leader employed simple but forceful methods to carry out his message. He relied on writing letters, using the vote and old-fashioned leg work in his quest for racial equality. Perhaps Moore's most important ally in all his trials was his own courage.

In one letter Moore reminded Florida citizens to continue the NAACP's long-standing fight for justice and equal rights.

"Are you playing your part in this noble fight?" he asked. "Remember the old proverb: 'He who would be free must himself strike the first blow.'"

Moore built a career around striking first.

He founded and became president of the first Brevard County branch of the NAACP in 1934. During the next decade, Moore traveled the state forming new branches and recruiting members in rural areas. He ran his Model T Ford into the ground. Under his watch, the NAACP in Florida grew from nine branches and a few hundred members to 53 branches and 10,000 members in the 1940s. He formed the first Florida state conference of NAACP branches in 1941, and by 1946 became its full-time, paid executive secretary.

The Florida NAACP gained notoriety because of Moore's stance on violence against blacks. He campaigned for an anti-lynching bill and investigated the violence himself if police ignored it. He even collected sworn affidavits from surviving family members. His best-known intervention came when the Groveland rape case emerged.

> "Every advancement comes by way of sacrifice. What I am doing is for the benefit of my race."
>
> -Harry T. Moore

Norma Padgett accused four black men of raping her in the Lake County town of Groveland. Lawmen arrested three of the suspects within 24 hours after the alleged incident. A posse, led by infamous Lake County Sheriff Willis V. McCall, hunted down and killed the fourth suspect. An angry mob, made up of mostly Ku Klux Klan members, terrorized Groveland's black residents.

No members of the mob were ever arrested. However, a jury found the three remaining suspects in the Groveland case guilty in less than 90 minutes. The U.S. Supreme Court overturned the convictions in April 1951 because of pretrial publicity.

Months later, Sheriff McCall shot and killed one of the defendants and seriously wounded the other while transporting the them back to Lake County for a retrial. McCall was cleared of any wrongdoing, despite the surviving suspect's claim of attempted murder. Moore called for McCall's removal, but was ignored.

Moore's battle for equal rights extended beyond his work to end violence against blacks.

In 1937 Moore started his quest to equalize salaries for black and white teachers. Blacks received half the minimum salary of whites in Brevard County. Black school facilities remained separate but not equal around the state. He had petitioned the Brevard County School Board for several years hoping for results, but nothing significant came of it.

Moore refused to give up and made plans to file suit for equal pay among teachers. He also called in reinforcements.

That year he began correspondence with Thurgood Marshall, who was enthused about the promise of the case, saying it held "immense importance." After a plaintiff volunteered, Moore's attorney filed the case in state court. The judge dismissed it on the grounds that the Florida Constitution did not require a teacher's salary schedule. Moore's attorney filed an appeal, but the Florida Supreme Court squashed it.

Moore lost the case but laid the groundwork for future cases that Marshall tried and won, earning him the nickname "Mr. Civil Rights."

White Primary Bill, March, 1947
Harry T. Moore launches a crusade against a "white primary bill" by Senator John Matthews.

Robinson Plays, April 10, 1947
Jackie Robinson joins the Brooklyn Dodgers and becomes the first black to play in the major leagues.

"Secure These Rights," Oct. 29, 1947
President Truman's Committee on Civil Rights issues "To Secure These Rights," a report condemning racial injustices and urging reform.

NAACP Membership Peaks, Dec., 1947
Membership numbers peak for Florida at 10,672 in 63 branches.

Dues Increase, July, 1948
The NAACP raises its dues from $1 to $2 and membership falls.

Executive Order 9981, July 26,1948
President Truman issues another executive order. This one calls for "equality of treatment and opportunity" in the military.

Groveland Interviews, July 29, 1949
A NAACP attorney interviews three black defendants in the Groveland rape case. The defendants describe beatings they received and claimed to be innocent.

Groveland Three Convicted, Sept. 3, 1949
The three surviving defendants in the Groveland rape case are convicted. Two receive death sentences.

The relentless Moore would not lose in every battle, though.

The battle that mattered most to Moore was politics and the ballot. He taught black children how to fill out a ballot when he was a teacher, something unheard of in the early 1930s. His love for the power of the vote led him to found the Progressive Voter's League of Florida with other NAACP leaders in 1944.

The organization served as a political arm of the NAACP, which aimed to stay out of politics. The Progressive Voters' League ended up registering 100,000 blacks to vote under Moore's guidance. He helped thousands of blacks register as democrats during the "lily white primary" era. He also fought off two separate political attempts to bypass the U.S. Supreme Court decision of 1944 that outlawed all-white primaries.

The leader would send out questionnaires to possible democratic candidates requesting their position on issues important to blacks. Moore would then address church congregations, urging them to vote democrat.

Amidst all the pushing and pioneering in civil rights, leaders began to inquire about Harry T. Moore.

An aide to Governor Millard Caldwell wrote a letter in 1946 to a commissioner in Brevard County: "What about Harry T. Moore? He is a Negro, is he not? Give me the dope on him."

The commissioner replied, calling Moore a "troublemaker" and a "Negro organizer."

People started to notice the friction Moore caused—a friction that would build and build, leading to his death.

Thugs broke into his home. A grove owner said he ought to have his neck broken. Public leaders ignored his requests, and some thought he should tone down his political activities. He refused.

And the social climate, in which blacks were made to feel inferior, futher fueled his resolve.

After the 1896 Supreme Court decision in the *Plessy v. Ferguson* case, Southern politicians rushed to pass new Jim Crow laws. These laws hammered home the new legal doctrine of "separate but equal." They segregated blacks from whites on buses, in restaurants and in the classroom. Blacks could not serve on juries and voting was considered suicide, as the Ku Klux Klan intimidated all those who tried.

And sheriffs in some communities during the 1930s and '40s helped supply the dominant Central Florida citrus industry's white grove owners with a good labor supply—at the time, blacks were the cheapest. Many blacks returning from duty overseas in World War II came back to a life picking fruit in the groves. After experiencing freedom in foreign cities like Paris, some blacks demanded more and shunned the culture that pushed them back into the fields, according to Clark.

> "It's clear in my mind that he thought he had the power to change the fate of Florida,"
> -Ben Green, biographer

Of course, Moore's work with the Progressive Voters' League and the NAACP brought him head to head with local grove owners and politicians.

Some politicians saw him as a threat because he sought to register black voters and encouraged them to vote democrat. Blacks could vote in general elections, but that right remained meaningless as long as the democrats made all the important decisions. Even though

Moore Under Fire, Dec. 5, 1949
Gloster Current criticizes Harry T. Moore's work with the Florida State Conference of the NAACP.

"Hatchet Job," Sept. 25, 1950
NAACP staffer Donald Byrd writes that he will pull a "hatchet job" on Moore in Florida.

Groveland Convictions Reversed, April 9, 1951
The U.S. Supreme Court reverses the Groveland convictions.

Groveland Convictions Upheld, May 17, 1950
The Florida Supreme Court upholds the Groveland convictions. The NAACP appeals

Write-In Miracle, Nov. 7, 1950
Harry T. Moore helps defeat A. Fortenberry, a longtime Brevard County Commission chairman. The candidate endorsed by the

Mysterious Shooting, Nov. 6, 1951
Lake County Sheriff Willis McCall shoots two Groveland defendants in an alleged escape attempt. McCall was cleared, but Moore pressed for his suspension

The Harry T. Moore Homesite Development Committee is looking for any information pertaining to the Moores that would aid in the creation of the home site. This includes personal recollections of the Moores, layout of their house or any artifacts and documents relating to Harry Moore or the Florida civil rights movement of the 1930s and 1940s. Anyone with information can contact Cheryl Page at (321) 264-5105 or e-mail MooreHomesite@nbbd.com.

For more information on Harry T. and Harriette V. Moore see:

Before His Time: The Untold Story of Harry T. Moore, America's First Civil Rights Martyr, **a biography by Ben Green.**

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Freedom Never Dies: The Legacy of Harry T. Moore, **a documentary by The Documentary Institute at the University of Florida.**

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The Harry T. Moore Home site on the Internet— www.nbbd.com/godo/moore

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Freedom Never Dies: The Legacy of Harry T. Moore **on the Internet— www.pbs.org/harrymoore**

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The Moore Heritage Festival of the Arts and Humanities— www.nbbd.com/MooreFestival

republican Abraham Lincoln freed the blacks, the Republican Party during Moore's time lacked the power and influence to aid blacks.

Moore's political activism eventually cost him and and his wife their jobs as teachers in Brevard County. Plus, it created a rift between him and the NAACP. Membership in Florida began to fall steadily after its peak in 1946. The organization doubled its yearly dues to $2 during a time when politicians labeled the group as radical.

Along with a sharp decline in membership, the Florida NAACP faced financial woes, owing Moore a year's worth of salary. National NAACP leaders blamed him for the problems in Florida and planned to remove him as its leader. Although Moore could rally people around causes, he was not a good manager. He cited the increase in dues as a reason for the membership decline and debt. In November 1951, the NAACP ousted the civil rights leader.

It was just weeks prior to Moore's dismissal that saw Willis McCall, the staunch segregationist sheriff of Lake County, cleared of wrongdoing in the Groveland shootings. Many people believe that Moore's drive to remove McCall from his post, his travels around the state on behalf of the defendants, his letters and his fundraising efforts for the accused in the Groveland case led to his Christmas Day murder.

Following Moore's death, President Harry Truman and Florida Governor Fuller Warren received thousands of letters denouncing the violent incident and calling for a full investigation.

FBI agents arrived on the scene of the bombing before daylight on Dec. 26. They began an exhaustive and thorough investigation.

Agents scoured the bombed-out house for clues and interviewed every resident in Mims. The lawmen also developed informants within the KKK, which would later help them uncover other violent incidents. The FBI narrowed a list down to two prime suspects, Tillman H. Belvin and Earl Brooklyn. Each man had a notorious reputation with the KKK.

Despite having obtained sworn statements from klansmen implicating fellow brothers on a number of crimes, the case would eventually fall apart. One klansman, Joseph Neville Cox, committed suicide after his second interview with the FBI. During the interview, he kept asking agents whether the evidence they had would hold up in court.

Agents focused on Brooklyn and Belvin so much that Cox's suicide never alarmed them. Some experts consider this a major blunder, but the FBI contended that the suicide only demonstrated that Cox had knowledge of the crime, not that he committed the murder.

Months later, informants and witnesses refused to cooperate with the FBI. Brooklyn and Belvin, who were each suffering from medical problems, died in 1952. The FBI continued to pressure the KKK, but no direct evidence could ever be uncovered. The case was closed in 1955.

Even though authorities re-opened the case in 1978 and 1991, no new concrete evidence surfaced. The re-examinations of the case only left officials with more murky stories and dead ends.

Whomever killed Harry Moore and his wife silenced a man who could have had even a more profound impact on the approaching civil rights movement and Florida.

"It's clear in my mind that he thought he had the power to change the fate of Florida," Green says.

He placed the needs of an entire race before his own, no matter the consequences. His sacrifice makes historian Jim Clark wonder, "Would you have the courage to do something that cost you your job, makes you an outcast in your community and a target of violence?"

Harry Moore did.

Moore Loses Job, Nov. 24, 1951
The Florida NAACP abolishes Harry T. Moore's position with the state conference. He stays on as an unpaid state coordinator.

House Bombing, Dec. 25, 1951
Harry T. Moore's house is bombed. He dies on the way to the hospital.

Devoted Wife Dies, Jan. 2, 1952
Harriette V. Moore dies one day after Harry's funeral.

Nationwide Protest, Jan. 5, 1952
Protests start around the country over the Moore bombing.

Groveland Defendant Guilty, Feb. 15, 1952
Thurgood Marshall defends Walter Irvin in his second trial concerning the Groveland case. He is convicted.

Medal of Honor, June 27, 1952
The NAACP awards the Spingarn Medal to Harry T. Moore, posthumously.

Perjury, June 3, 1953
A Federal grand Jury indicts seven klansmen from Orlando for perjury relating to the Moore bombing.

Bus Boycott, June 19, 1953
A bus boycott begins in Baton Rouge, LA. It would be the first protest against discrimination on public transportation.

Indictments Dismissed, Dec. 30, 1953
The perjury indictments against the seven klansmen are dismissed because the FBI lacked jurisdiction.

Brown Decision, May 17, 1954
The U.S. Supreme Court overturns *Plessy v. Ferguson* decision in the *Brown v. Board of Education* decision declaring that "separate but equal" is unconstitutional.