'Race Against Time’ re-examines unsolved civil rights cases

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BY DR. GLENN C. ALTSCHULER
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“The past is never dead,” William Faulkner wrote in “Requiem for a Nun.” “It’s not even past.”

In “Race Against Time,” Jerry Mitchell applies this aphorism to racially motivated murders of the 1960s: The assassination of Medgar Evers; the fire-bombing of the home of Vernon Dahmer; the bombing of Sixteenth Street Baptist Church in Birmingham, Alabama that killed four girls; and the Mississippi Burning killing of James Chaney, Mickey Schwerner and Andrew Goodman.

A journalist for the Clarion-Ledger in Jackson, Mississippi for more than three decades and the founder of the Mississippi Center for Investigative Reporting, Mitchell braved death threats to play a pivotal role in reopening and prosecuting these cold cases. Sobering and suspenseful, his book is a must-read during Black History month.

Leads ignored

As he discovers relevant documents, identifies new witnesses, and interviews suspected murderers – “these Klansmen always talk to you,” his editor observes – Mitchell makes you wonder why police and prosecutors failed to follow these leads in the 1970s, ‘80s and ‘90s.

He also unearths evidence that the killers had the tacit, and often explicit, support of segregationist elites and public officials in Mississippi and Alabama when they committed their crimes.

In the trial of the alleged killers of Medgar Evers, for example, an agent for the Sovereignty Commission, a state agency, pre-screened jurors, contacted members of their families, and reported the results to defense lawyers. And Neshoba County sheriff Lawrence Rainey was actively involved in the Mississippi Burning murders.

Hate killed him

Equally important, Mitchell reminds us of the courage of men like Vernon Dahmer, who fought his whole life for the right of African Americans to vote but was never able to cast a ballot.
Killed for no reason other than hate, Dahmer’s son tells Mitchell, Vernon Sr. never “had an opportunity to see his grandkids grow up and enjoy the life that those who killed him are still enjoying.”

Mitchell wants to believe that the convictions obtained in these cases, albeit belatedly, indicate that the South has changed. But he’s not sure. The presence of African Americans on juries has, of course, been essential to the recent verdicts.

**Vigilantes’ stance**

But many civil rights era cold cases have never reached a courtroom.

More than a few people told him that prosecutions were sad days for the county because they did nothing else but “open up old wounds.”

Following the conviction of Edgar Lee Killen in 2005 for the Mississippi Burning murders, Mitchell notes, White supremacists planned a “Killen Appreciation Day,” to make the point that “vigilante justice is needed when ordinary justice doesn’t do its job – in this case keeping Schwerner, Goodman, and Chaney out of Mississippi.”

And a bomb threat during the trial of KKK Imperial Wizard Samuel Bowers for killing Dahmer “brought the terror of the past hurtling into the present.”

**New ‘wave of hate’**

In recent years, Mitchell notes, “a wave of hate has risen up again.”

In 2015, Dylan Roof walked into Emanuel African American Episcopal Church in Charleston, killing nine parishioners, as he shouted, “I have to do it. You rape our women and you’re taking over the country. You have to go.” And hate crimes have reached record levels in the United States.

At times like this, “when I feel I cannot pray,” Myrlie Evers tells Mitchell, “my prayer becomes one word, ‘help.’ That is all I can do.”

Mitchell’s guiding principle remains “Truth rules, while hate thrives on obfuscation, murkiness, and fear.” A true account of a painful past “helps point our compass toward justice. We must remember and then act.”

All the more so when we realize that “the past is never dead. It isn’t even past.”

Dr. Glenn C. Altschuler is the Thomas and Dorothy Litwin Professor of American Studies at Cornell University. He wrote this review for the Florida Courier.