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I Question Whether We Have Learned 'Citizenship' in Our Generation

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I Question Whether We Have Learned 'Citizenship' in Our Generation

By Terri Susan Fine
UCF Forum columnist
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About a year ago a dear friend gave me a copy of the Pulitzer Prize-winning book “Devil in the Grove: Thurgood Marshall, the Groveland Boys, and the Dawn of a New America” by Gilbert King. The 2012 book earned the 2013 Pulitzer Prize for general nonfiction and the Pulitzer Committee described the book as a “richly detailed chronicle of racial injustice.”

The book focuses on the “Groveland Four,” four African-Americans unjustly accused of raping a white 17-year-old girl in Groveland, about 30 miles west of Orlando in July 1949.

The accusation led to the death of one suspect by a posse, a white mob rampaging through the black section of Groveland and beating “confessions” out of the three remaining suspects, an initial tainted conviction, the murder of one and wounding of another suspect at the hands of the sheriff as they were being transported back for a new trial, and the eventual reconviction on flimsy evidence against one of the two remaining living suspect.

On Dec. 25, 1951, in Mims, a bomb killed the executive director of the Florida NAACP, Harry T. Moore, and his wife as they slept in their home. An investigation 50 years later suggested that Moore’s efforts to organize a defense for the Groveland Four and his success in registering 100,000 black voters served as the primary motives.

King’s narrative is both disturbing and uplifting. It is disturbing because of the barbarism directed at the four suspects, the absence of due process, and the white supremacist culture in which the accusations and the ensuing trial transpired. Yet the story is uplifting because the NAACP, specifically Thurgood Marshall, the head of the

NAACP's Legal Defense Fund, became involved in defending the Groveland Four. His civil-rights heroism continues to be impactful to this day.

It was Marshall who would later argue that "separate but equal" schools were not and could not be equal, in the landmark *Brown v. Board of Education* case of 1954. It was also Marshall who would become the first African-American member of the Supreme Court in 1967.

The events in Groveland were not unique in Florida. Despite its reputation for racial moderation, Florida's white society brutally enforced segregation and discrimination into the 1960s as lawmakers enacted policies that curtailed minority rights. Florida's reputation for racial moderation during those years has focused on Gov. LeRoy Collins' measured response to the Brown case as compared to the massive resistance advocated by other southern politicians.

During that time, the Legislature passed a number of bills designed to fight integration. In addition, after Collins, Floridians elected governors who campaigned against integration, civil rights and busing, and made little effort to promote racial equality in the three elections that followed.

Florida's image of historic racial moderation also suffers when looking at political violence and intimidation. From 1882 to 1930 Florida had the highest per capita lynching rate among 10 southern states. In 1920, when blacks tried to vote in Ocoee, whites killed 50 blacks, burned black-owned homes, and chased almost all African-Americans out of town. In 1923, a white mob of more than 200 descended on the mostly black town of Rosewood in Levy County where they razed all black-owned buildings, killed and wounded numerous blacks, and chased off all other black residents.

The story of the Groveland Four troubles me for many reasons, including Groveland's geographical and temporal proximity to UCF.

Groveland is a mere 45 miles west of UCF's main campus east of Orlando. While on Florida's Turnpike, I pass the exit to Groveland regularly in my travels as content specialist for the Florida Joint Center for Citizenship. I question whether and how we have learned "citizenship" as a state in the past approximately 65 years in light of the events that transpired in Groveland.

Many Central Floridians were alive – and remember – when the Groveland Four were accused and the case transpired, as well as the other racially motivated events that followed.

In essence, Groveland and the Groveland Four are neither geographically nor temporally close to UCF. This case provides rich material upon which to reflect and ponder racial injustice in its many forms.

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