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Dr. Ben Brotemarkle

Florida Historical Society, ben.brotemarkle@myfloridahistory.org

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Transcript

Ben Brotemarkle

Florida Frontiers, the weekly radio magazine of the Florida Historical Society, is made possible in part by the Department of State, Division of Historical Resources, and the state of Florida. It's also made possible by the Jessie Ball DuPont Fund and by the historic Rossiter House Museum and Gardens in Eau Gallie, celebrating pioneer history, the natural environment, and women's history, available for weddings at events at rossiterhousemuseum.org.

This is Florida Frontiers, the weekly radio magazine of the Florida Historical Society, on the web at myfloridahistory.org. I'm Ben Brotemarkle and coming up on the program, biographer Ben Green discusses educator and civil rights activist Harry T. Moore, who was killed on Christmas night 1951.

Ben Green

I think it was a political assassination. I don't think it was just some old racist Klansmen said let's take out that so and so

Ben Brotemarkle

We'll discuss the latest book by historian Cantor Brown Jr., a biography of Gilded Age entrepreneur Henry Plant.

Connie Lester

Brown's chronological format facilitates the readers appreciation for the triumphs and setbacks of one of the leading entrepreneurs of the 19th century.

Ben Brotemarkle

And we'll talk about the return of the annual Surfing Santas event. All that ahead on Florida Frontiers. On Christmas night 1951 a bomb exploded under the home of educator and activist Harry T. Moore. The home was in Mims, Florida, just north of Titusville and east of Orlando. Both Moore, and his wife Harriet, died from injuries sustained in the blast. The book before his time, *The Untold Story of Harry T. Moore, America's First Civil Rights Martyr*, is being published in a new edition with updated material. Ben Green is author of this comprehensive biography.

Ben Green

Harry more grew up in a little place called Halston outside of Live Oak, which is just really a hole in the wall. I mean, there's just nothing there, no stop sign, traffic light. His father died when he was young. His father worked on the railroads taking care of the big water tanks for the steam engines. And his mother worked in the cotton fields. And then she had a little store basically just a little shack where she sold candy and soda pops, goods like that.

Ben Brotemarkle

After the death of Harry's father, the young boy was sent to live with three aunts in Jacksonville, Florida. All three were well educated professional women.

Ben Green

I think that was the other part that he got out of the country. And not just living with these three women who were talking politics and literature and world events. But the black community in Jacksonville was vibrant and alive with culture and black owned businesses. So, I really think it really just opened up the world.

Ben Brotemarkle

Harry T. Moore left Jacksonville to become a teacher. He made his way to Brevard County in 1925 to teach at the Cocoa Colored School and was later promoted to principal of the Titusville Negro's School.

Ben Green

One of the things about that I don't think many people realize is even as late as the 1930s, only half of the counties in Florida had a black high school. So, if you wanted to go beyond elementary school, to school, often you had to go out of town, you had to go away. So, Harry left Jacksonville and actually went back to Live Oak and went to Florida Memorial College, which was located there. It was a college but also had a high school program. So, he graduated in 1925 with a normal degree, basically a teaching certificate and got a job in Cocoa teaching in Brevard County.

Ben Brotemarkle

And soon after arriving in Brevard County, Harry T. Moore met his soulmate Harriet Vyda Sims. The couple was married on Christmas Day 1926.

Ben Green

Well, I think that's it's an interesting thing. They were both very sort of sober, serious people. They met at a card party, at a whiskey party, and she was an older woman. She was like two years older than he was, but obviously they hit it off. He used to tell his daughters it was love at first sight. And so very quickly, they got married, and her parents sort of gave them a piece of land on their property in this grove, and they built a house and started a family.

Ben Brotemarkle

Education was important and the more household the entire family. Harry, Harriet, and daughters Peaches and Evangeline, would all graduate from Bethune Cookman College in Daytona. Harry T. Moore's civil rights activities, including an effort to equalize pay for black and white teachers, would lead to him being forced to resign from the Brevard County School System. Ben Green.

Ben Green

I think he started his activism with what he knew best, which was education. And so, through his involvement with the Florida State Teachers Association, which was the black teacher organization, he filed the first lawsuit in the deep south to equalize black and white teacher salaries. Black teachers, black principals made basically half what their white counterparts did. That was also the first time that he interacted with Thurgood Marshall. Thurgood Marshall had filed the first lawsuit had won the first lawsuit in the country to equalize black and white teacher salaries. But that was in Maryland, border

state. And Thurgood was working for the NAACP already. So, Harry Moore wrote him a letter and said we want to move on this in Florida. And it was the first I think of many interactions that they had.

Ben Brotemarkle

After losing his teaching job, Harry T. Moore had more time to dedicate to his civil rights activities. He founded the Brevard County branch of the NAACP and created the Progressive Voters League.

Ben Green

There were three big things that he worked on. One was teacher salaries, the other would be voter registration, and then third would be lynchings. But really, this is another juncture where he and Thurgood Marshall came together. In 1941, Thurgood Marshall won this Supreme Court decision, *Smith v. Allwright*, that outlawed the white primary, which was the only election that mattered in the Deep South. Harry Moore immediately organized the Progressive Voters League in Florida and started registering black Floridians in the Democratic Party.

Ben Brotemarkle

After forming the Brevard County branch of the NAACP more became active with the organization on the state level. The relationship between more and the national office was sometimes contentious. Ben Green author of *Before his Time*.

Ben Green

This is one of the most surprising things I found when I started doing this book, I thought I was writing a book about NAACP hero. And I found out that actually there was tremendous tension, conflict between Moore and the national office in New York. I think there were two things, one is his political activism; the NAACP was supposed to be nonpartisan, and Harry T. Moore understood that if you're not registered in the Democratic Party in Florida, it does no good. And so he started pushing to register and eventually registered over 100,000 blacks in the Democratic Party. At the same time, most of the black leadership in the NAACP were Republicans, because that was the only party they could be part of, and they'd sort of get crumbs thrown their way. And so, he built, he got some resentment from black leaders in Florida, particularly in big cities, because he was a small-town guy. But then, more so, I think the national office didn't like it because he became a paid executive secretary and all the money he was raising to pay his own salary could have gone to New York.

Ben Brotemarkle

After Harry T. Moore was killed, the NAACP was quick to claim him as one of their own, even though he had been fired.

Ben Green

Yeah, it was really one of the most tragic parts of this, and actually, the thing more than anything that angered Evangeline Moore, is when she found out when my book came out, that they went out of their way to actually fired him before he was killed. And then as soon as he was killed, I described it as they became a cottage industry of raising money off Harry T. Moore and had fundraisers all around the country and in New York and Madison Square Garden, raising money for the NAACP based on his murder.

Ben Brotemarkle

The murders of Harry T. and Harriet V. Moore have never been solved. It's possible that it was Moore's activities registering African Americans to vote that led to a bomb being placed under his home. Others believe it was his involvement in the infamous Groveland rape trial that inspired this act of domestic terrorism.

Ben Green

I think it was a political assassination. I don't think it was just some old racist Klansmen said let's take out that so and so, I think it was because he had registered 100,000 black voters in the Democratic Party. The night of his death at Christmas dinner, and his mother in law's house in the grove, when the last conversations he had with his best friend from Cocoa was about how the black vote was going to determine the outcome of the 1952 governor's race. And he was going around the state saying the black vote will determine the outcome of every election in Florida. And I think that's why he was killed. I think he was killed to try to suppress black election power. And it worked, what voter registration plummeted. After his death It took another 10 or 15 years till the civil rights movement to get it back to where it was. So, I think it was a political assassination more than just an individual hate crime.

Ben Brotemarkle

In 1949, Harry T Moore was actively involved in seeking justice for four young black man accused of raping a white woman in Groveland, one of the accused was killed by law enforcement before he could be arrested. The other three men were tortured during questioning and had evidence manufactured against them by the notoriously racist Sheriff Willis McCall. The Supreme Court overturned the original convictions, and a new trial was scheduled. Ben Green.

Ben Green

The day of the hearing for the new trial, Willis McCall and his deputy went to Raiford to pick them up. On the way back to Lake County and claimed that the two prisoners jumped him and attacked him, and he shot him. He emptied his revolver into him. He killed Sam Shepard, mortally, seriously, critically wounded Walter Ervin, who did survive, and told a completely different story, which is McCall just yanked him out and started shooting. At that point, Harry T. Moore started calling for McCall to be removed from office indicted for murder. He's telegraphing and writing letters to the governor, to the U.S, attorney, to Thurgood Marshall, to the FBI. And then just six weeks later, he was blown up in his house. So, the morning after the bombing in Mims, people immediately connected the Groveland case to the Moore bombing. And when the FBI agents and local deputies work their way through the crowd that had gathered and said why would anyone have wanted to kill Harry Moore, everybody immediately said Groveland.

Ben Brotemarkle

Harry T and Harriet V Moore were killed 12 years before Medgar Evers, 14 years before Malcolm X, and 17 years before Martin Luther King Jr. But their legacy has been often overlooked.

Ben Green

In a way I think they're like multiple tragedies. One is they were killed, and the murders have never been solved. And then in some ways, it's almost equally tragic they weren't forgotten. I feel like the most poignant epitaph really is he was killed three years too early. If he had been killed in 1954, after the Brown decision, he would be Medgar Evers. He was Medgar Evers, he just did it before anybody was paying attention. He would have been in every history book, everybody would have known his name, but it was 1951, there was no civil rights movement, there were new TV cameras filming the dogs attacking children in Birmingham. The murders were not solved. It was really just forgotten about.

Ben Brotemarkle

In recent years, Harry T and Harriet V. Moore have been getting some of the recognition they deserve. An exhibit about the Moores is on display at the Smithsonian's National Museum of African American History and Culture in Washington D.C. The Harry T and Harriet V Moore Cultural Complex built on the more family homestead and Mims, Florida has a Civil Rights Museum, a reflecting pool, and a replica of the Moore family home.

Ben Green

It's been slow and gradual. There have been other contributions, the documentary film that PBS did. There's a song, you know, The Ballad of Harry T Moore, you can find that on YouTube, Sweet Honey in the Rock. But I bet you if you went to Brevard County and took a poll, I bet still the majority of people there don't even know who he is. I mean, the courthouse is named after him, there's the cultural center, I think they are still in a way fighting a losing battle against the tourist industry in Florida. And the fact that how many people who moved here just came here in the last four, five, ten years. I didn't say this, but I think it's valid, he was our Martin Luther King. He was Florida's Martin Luther King. And yet I still think the majority of Floridians don't know who he is, not to mention probably 95% of at least of Americans have no idea who he is.

Ben Brotemarkle

Ben Green is author of the book before his time the untold story of *Harry T Moore, America's First Civil Rights Martyr*. A new edition of the book with updated material is being published by the Florida Historical Society Press.

This is Florida Frontiers, the weekly radio magazine of the Florida Historical Society. I'm Ben Brotemarkle. Visit us anytime on the web at myfloridahistory.org where all FHS press books are 50% off for the holidays, including *Before His Time* by Ben Green. You can also watch archived episodes of our television series, Florida Frontiers, and subscribe to our journal the Florida Historical Quarterly. That's myfloridahistory.org.

Joining us now is Connie Lester, Associate Professor of History at the University of Central Florida, director of the RICHES Digital Archiving Project, and editor of the Florida Historical Quarterly. Together with Henry Flagler, Henry Plant helped to create Florida's railroad infrastructure. Connie, we're going to discuss the book *Henry Bradley Plant, Gilded Age Dreams for Florida and a New South*.

Connie Lester

Yes, and in the introduction to his biography, Cantor Brown hails Plant as a man who helped to invent modern Florida, an entrepreneur whose vision and reach in fact ranged internationally, and whose policies helped to pioneer modern and corporate approaches in a variety of areas including employee relations and benefits. Exhaustively researched and well written, Brown's chronological format facilitates the readers appreciation for the triumphs and setbacks of one of the leading entrepreneurs of the 19th century. Plant's climb from lowly express man to President of the Plant system of railroads, steam ships, hotels, and PICO, the Plant Investment Company, was the stuff of Gilded Age dreams. Like the Horatio Alger tales of the day, Plant's rise, and frequent rescue, from failure or disgrace often rested on the intervention or obfuscation of a tight circle of friends, many of whom he had known since childhood. For Brown, the challenge in writing Plant's biography centered on uncovering the real man behind Plant's overwhelming characteristic of plausible deniability. Hiding behind friends and employees, Plant was frequently the ghost in his own biography. His life was spent in well-crafted rhetoric shaped by what the Plant enterprise wanted the public to see. Only rarely did the curtain open, and even then, we are left with speculative assumptions about what occurred out of sight. Brown navigates this minefield of sources, hinting at Plant's less than sterling private life with the assurance of a notable scholar. He allows the reader to see where the sources are limited, particularly in Plant's personal life, suggesting questionable behavior without speculating about it.

Ben Brotemarkle

Now Henry Plant doesn't always get the same attention as his entrepreneurial contemporaries, does he?

Connie Lester

No, he doesn't. Henry Plant is the lesser known, until now, of Florida's three Henrys: Henry Sanford, Henry Flagler, and Henry Plant. All three contemporaries saw a promising future for Florida in railroad tourism and citrus, that in fact shaped the state's future economic development. Of the three, Plant had the strongest claims on what came to be the dream of the Gilded Age, poor boy makes good. Born in Connecticut in the heyday of the Market Revolution, and the fire and brimstone of the Second Great Awakening, Plant experienced a chaotic boyhood that established his determination for financial success. Quick learning and hardworking, Plant started his career as a lowly express man on a packet ship. The highly competitive movement of letters and freight between New England and New York provided Plant with an insider's view of what would prove to be his life's work. Much of the action that resulted in his climb to wealth and control over transportation systems occurred outside Florida in the Northeast Europe and Atlanta. But the chapters on his Florida hotels, and his rail and ship line connections between Florida and Havana, are worth the wait. Plant's system of hotels, railroads, and steamships facilitated the movement of winter tourists to Central and South Florida, Key West, and Havana. At the same time, winter fruits and vegetables traveled to markets in the North. Plant City in Central Florida was named in his honor. But business in the late 19th century experienced several setbacks, including a depression that began in 1893. In Florida, the freezes in the winter of 1894-1895 destroyed the citrus industry for the next decade. Finally, turbulent events in Cuba raised the risk of expansion in that area.

Ben Brotemarkle

And Connie like all of us, even the very wealthy only have so much time here.

Connie Lester

Yes, in 1899 at age 80, Henry Plant died suddenly at his New York City home. His pallbearers included such luminaries as Henry Flagler, U.S. Senator Thomas Platt, and former Georgia Governor Rufus Bullock. Newspaper editors and friends vied to produce the highest praise for his life. One editor claimed, "he has done more to develop the south, and particularly Florida than any dozen men living." Charles Henry Smith, a well-known southern humorist, wrote, "I know of no greater man in the line of public progress and public benefaction. Many millionaires have acquired fortune from speculation, speculation that robbed others, many have built on the foundations that others laid, and some have wrecked railroads and private enterprises on purpose for their own profit. But Mr. Plant made honest plans in early life and has by slow ensure degrees expanded and matured them. He has added to values not only of his own property, but to that of communities and states. He has proved himself an unselfish friend to the South and won the love and admiration of our people." Sadly, Plant's carefully constructed hierarchy of enterprises did not long survive his death. Squabbles over his will encourage entrepreneurs to buy up parts of his empire within a decade. The Plant system was no more.

Ben Brotemarkle

But Henry Plant's legacy certainly lives on in Florida history. Thanks, Connie.

Connie Lester

You're welcome.

Ben Brotemarkle

Connie Lester is Associate Professor of History at the University of Central Florida, director of the RICHS digital archiving project, and editor of the Florida Historical Quarterly.

This is Florida Frontiers. Every Christmas Eve, hundreds of people dressed as Santa Claus participate in the Surfing Santas event in Cocoa Beach, with thousands more watching. As Holly Baker reports since COVID forced cancellation of last year's gathering, a big turnout is expected this year.

Holly Baker

The annual Surfing Santas event and Cocoa Beach has become a holiday tradition for families along Florida's Space Coast. I recently talked with George Trosset, the founder of Surfing Santa, who is a native of Rockledge, Florida. He's been surfing since he was 12 years old. He told me more about the popular Surfing Santas event.

George Trosset

We had our first surfing Santa, and that's singular, in 2009. I'd seen this advertisement on TV, and it was for Honda Motors, and Honda ran, they ran this ad, and they showed some people surfing some four- and five-foot beautiful waves in Santa suits. And I just said I want to be a Surfing Santa. So, my wife went to the thrift store and found me a raincoat. It was red, we added some fuzz on it to make it look like a Santa jacket. We made a beard out of this same blanket material. I called my son up; I said George I need you to be at the beach house in the morning. This is on the 23rd, and I need you to have elf outfits. You and your wife and we're going surfing and I'm going to be Santa you're going to be elves and the newspapers are going to come take a picture. He showed up at the beach house, yhe waves were about

four-foot, kind of rough but nice waves. And we paddled out and went surfing as Santa and his elves and the newspaper took a little picture that wound up in the front page of The Florida Today on Christmas Day, 2009. No big deal. Just a little family day on the beach, had a little fun, starting a new tradition. We had no idea what it was going to become.

Holly Baker

Since the first Surfing Santas event in 2009. The number of attendees has continued to grow.

George Trosset

So, next year I'd see friends at the mall or go surfing with somebody and they say Hey, George, what's the surfing Santa thing? I saw your picture in the paper. I said I don't know, come to the beach house on the 24th and we'll figure it out. Well 19 of my friends showed up the next year. Everyone has Santa outfits, and we had ladies and men, and we just went surfing as Santa and it worked out pretty well, had a fun time. A little party at the house. A little food, a little beverage, we even had a fire on the beach because it was a cool day. Well then, the next year we had 84 Santas show up, I knew about half of them. The next year it's 158, then 225, and then pretty soon we have 600 Santas on the beach. And I like to say that Surfing Santas has become what it needs to be. And today it's a super fun family friendly positive, people are so positive on the beach, there's just energy on the beach when you're at the event. It's just it's very cool.

Holly Baker

The Surfing Santas event takes place every December 24 and includes a costume contest. Anyone can take part in the costume contest by dressing in a holiday themed outfit of their choice. Prizes are awarded to the winners of each division: babies, children, groups, men, and women.

George Trosset

The event has grown to these unbelievable numbers. One year we had over 800 people dressed as Santa. And I'm told we're on the beach, there's eight or 10,000 people coming down to watch. Now, I mean, it's a full-blown production, it takes about 60 days to iron out all the details, we start in October. It just takes a while to figure out all the things that are involved, there's permits with the city, there's the city of Cocoa Beach provides police and EMT, lifeguards, the fire department's involved. We've just had really good support from the city and others, which has allowed our event to grow and to be what it is today.

Holly Baker

Surfing Santas has raised almost \$100,000 for charity through donations collected at the December 24 gathering, and from sales of official Surfing Santas T shirts. proceeds go to the Florida Surf Museum and Cocoa Beach and Grind for Life, a local organization that provides financial assistance to cancer patients and their families. Surfing Santas has become such a popular event that it has a real chance of breaking a Guinness World Record. But George Trosset says it's not really about setting records. It's about bringing people together.

George Trosset

It's possible we're the largest surfing related event in the world. No other event gets 8-10,000 attendees and 6-800 surfers, but the size doesn't matter. What matters is we're making smiles. And when we hit the national media after our event, and it's on every television station you can think of, and everywhere you look there's something pops up about Surfing Santas, we're making smiles and that's what's important.

Holly Baker

A simple tradition that started with a surfer and his family catching waves together on Christmas Eve has turned into a globally recognized event that's attended by thousands of people and only continues to grow larger each year. George Trosset.

George Trosset

I've been told by many people that Surfing Santas is their new family tradition for Christmas Eve. And how cool is that? Our goofy little event has turned into something that people look forward to, it's so much fun. And what's really cool about the event day is you got eight or 10,000 happy people, their smile and they're taking selfies, or taking pictures with people walking by. It's all good positive talk, it's the most fun you can have over Christmas.

Holly Baker

The annual Surfing Santas event begins on December 24 at 8am along the beach near 3 Minutemen Causeway in Cocoa Beach and continues until noon. For more information go to surfingsantas.org. For Florida Frontiers, I'm Holly Baker, public history coordinator for the Florida Historical Society, and archivist at the Library of Florida History in Cocoa.

Ben Brotemarkle

You've been listening to Florida Frontiers, the weekly radio magazine of the Florida Historical Society. Please join us right here again next week. Until then find us anytime online at myfloridahistory.org and on Facebook. Production assistance for Florida Frontiers comes from Holly Baker and Connie Lester. The program is edited by Jon White. Happy holidays, I'm Ben Brotemarkle.

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