

# Museum Chronicles Civil Rights Triumphs, Sorrows

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MEMPHIS, Tenn., July 3—On the street where the Rev. Martin Luther King Jr. was slain stand two competing yet related symbols. One is a rough concrete wall in the 400 block of Mulberry Street that bears blood-red graffiti screaming in anger and frustration: "Save the Black Man!" On the other side looms a \$9.7 million museum documenting the blood, sweat and pain of the civil rights movement, whose goal, in a sense, was to create a society where

no one would need to spray-paint a plea for racial salvation.

When the National Civil Rights Museum is dedicated Thursday on the site of the old Lorraine Motel, where King was assassinated in 1968, the official exhibits inside and the unofficial exhibit on the wall across the street will serve as reminders that the civil rights movement did not begin with King nor end when he died.

Among the hundreds of movement veterans here this week for the museum opening and a related symposium, there was a sense that

many lessons of the old days need to be relearned and tactics revisited.

"What is happening around the country, I feel, is that the things people worked so hard for, we're losing it all," said Dave Dennis, a former field coordinator for the Congress of Racial Equality.

Dennis helped the Mississippi Freedom Party to mount its historic challenge against that state's segregationist Democrats in 1964, an action detailed inside the museum in Exhibit 10, "Freedom Summer." As proud as he is of those

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Workers put final touches on railing at Lorraine Motel, where King was slain.



Plaque sits outside motel, where concrete stained by King's blood has been saved.

deeds 27 years ago and of their place of honor in the museum, Dennis said he came here utterly discouraged by what he saw as the decline of black neighborhoods and businesses and the apathy of the younger generation. "Where are our children?" he asked.

Dennis's pessimistic outlook was countered somewhat by Rep. John Lewis (D-Ga.), a former movement organizer who participated in several events memorialized in the museum. Exhibit 9, "The March on Washington," features not only King's immortal "I Have a Dream" speech in 1963 but also a much feistier oration by Lewis, then chairman of the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee. And Exhibit 11, "Selma," shows Lewis, not King, at the head of the famous voting rights march over the Edmund Pettus Bridge on the way to Montgomery.

"Sometimes, I think as a nation we should all take a deep breath . . . and realize the distance we have come," Lewis said on the eve of the dedication. Lewis recalled his childhood in rural Alabama, where he helped his sharecropper father to raise chickens and even preached to the hens. "Martin Luther King gave me a way out," the three-term member of Congress said. "If it weren't for him, I'd still be down in rural Alabama preaching to those chickens."

In the next breath, however, he added, "The sad fact is that, 30 years after the Freedom Rides, the scars of racism are still deeply imbedded in American society."

Those rides are featured in Exhibit 6, one of the most chilling and evocative in the museum. It recounts the travails of blacks and whites who rode Greyhound and Trailways buses in May 1961 challenging the Jim Crow segregation policies in Deep South terminals. In Anniston, Ala., the freedom riders were attacked by a mob throwing bricks, rocks and a bomb that blew the roof off the bus and sent flames through the coach.

While that charred bus long ago went to the scrap heap, the museum found a similar model in a repair lot in Camden, N.J., and burned off its roof to replicate the original. Leading movement veterans on a tour of the museum this week,

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MUSEUM, From A30

Memphis Judge D'Army Bailey, the museum's president, recalled the day two months ago when the bus was set afire and doused by firefighters in a controlled maneuver. Hank Thomas, an original freedom rider, came to witness the burning.

"He was telling us how hot it got inside the bus and how scared they felt, trapped between the fire and the mob," Bailey said. "And as he

talked, the flames got closer to us, and we could feel the heat. We relived the horror."

Bailey, 49, who went from civil rights demonstrator to black nationalist to moderate lawyer, is the driving force behind transformation of the Lorraine into the museum to be dedicated Thursday morning by, among others, Rosa Parks, who set a movement in motion by refusing to sit in the back of a bus. Bailey led a local nonprofit group that bought

the Lorraine in 1982 for \$144,000 at a foreclosure sale and lobbied for six years to obtain state and local assistance in developing the site as a memorial to King and the movement.

"This is exactly what I envisioned," Bailey said this week as he toured the 10,000-square-foot facility with William Kunstler, the radical lawyer and one of King's personal counsels. "The movement deserves this. It deserves first-class



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Coretta Scott King is greeted by folk singer Pete Seeger as she arrives for an awards ceremony in Memphis on Tuesday.



treatment. It was one of the greatest movements in this country's history. If we had done anything less, it wouldn't be fitting. This is a holy site."

King's widow, Coretta Scott King, arrived for an awards ceremony Tuesday night but declined to participate in the dedication ceremonies and drove down Mulberry Street on the way from the airport only after Bailey pleaded with her to do so. King said she had been opposed to the concept of a museum at a site that, for her, evoked only personal tragedy. But she has changed her mind. "From this day forward, the Lorraine Motel represents more than the state where they slew the dreamer," she said. "Now it will also be the place where his dream is being redeemed on a daily basis."

King was shot by James Earl Ray a few minutes after 6 p.m. April 4, 1968, as he stood on the balcony outside Room 306. The room, part of Exhibit 15, cost \$13 a night then. It has been restored to look much like that day 23 years ago, including an orange spread like the one on King's bed that his compatriots wrapped around him after he was shot. Although the balcony was torn apart during renovations, an original section of bloody concrete where King fell is to be fitted back in place.

Visitors to the second-floor room exhibit will hear a recording of Mahalia Jackson singing "Precious Lord," a gospel song that King was discussing with Chicago saxophonist Ben Branch at the moment he was shot. Branch witnessed the assassination from the parking lot eight feet below, along with Jesse L. Jackson, Hosea Williams and several other King aides in the Southern Christian Leadership Conference. Ray's fatal shot came from the rear window of a boarding house at 418 Main St. that faced the Lorraine. The bullet's path is to be retraced by a colorful laser beam that reaches the balcony, then shoots toward the sky. "It is our version of an eternal flame," Bailey said.

Although celebrations are being held this week, the facility will not be completed until late August at the earliest. When Parks tours the museum Thursday, she will see in Exhibit 4, "Montgomery Bus Boycott," a yellow and green city bus exactly like the one she boarded in 1955, when she refused to relinquish her seat despite the driver's demands that she move back so more whites could sit in front. When the exhibit is finished, vis-

itors will hear a tape of a driver ordering them to move back to the colored section.

Other exhibits portray the *Brown v. Board of Education* decision by the Supreme Court in 1954; the forced integration of Central High School in Little Rock, Ark., in 1957; sit-ins at segregated lunch counters in 1960; James Meredith's admission to the University of Mississippi in 1963; confrontations with Eugene "Bull" Connor, public safety commissioner in Birmingham, Ala., in 1963; King's campaign against slums in 1965, and the sanitation workers strike that brought King to the Lorraine in 1968.

The wall across the street has its own curator of sorts—Jacqueline

Smith, who lived in the Lorraine for several years until being evicted three years ago to make way for the museum. Smith has spent 1,269 consecutive days campaigning against the museum from her sidewalk home under the wall. Besides being upset about her eviction, Smith complains that the \$5 admission price at the museum would be too high for poor people and that the state-funded enterprise will increase gentrification of the neighborhood.

Underneath a card table that serves as Smith's shrine to King rests a tattered blue suitcase with these words carved into its cloth side: "And We Shall See What Will Become of His Dream."