

**Morning Mix**

'We're truly sorry': Fla. apologizes for racial injustice of 1949 'Groveland Four' rape case

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In the summer of 1949, a 17-year-old white girl named Norma Padgett accused four black men of kidnapping her from a dark road in central Florida and then, in the back seat of their car, taking turns raping her.

Neighbors quietly doubted the girl's version of events, and others speculated that the elaborate, detailed account was [merely a coverup](#) for the bruises she'd collected from her husband's suspected beatings.

But this was the era of Jim Crow, in the middle of Lake County, where the local economy was sustained by orange groves that white men relied on black men to nurture.

And there to ensure law and order was Willis V. McCall, a [sheriff](#) buoyed by his segregationist, union-busting, white supremacist reputation.

Within days of Padgett's accusations, three black men from the city of Groveland were in jail and a fourth, Ernest Thomas, was dead, shot and killed by an angry mob — led by McCall — who had chased him 200 miles into the Panhandle. In Groveland, black-owned homes were shot up and burned, sparking chaos so intense the governor eventually sent in the National Guard.

Based on little evidence, a jury quickly convicted the living three.

Charles Greenlee, just 16 at the time, was sent to prison for life.

Samuel Shepherd and Walter Irvin, friends and Army veterans, were sentenced to death, but the U.S. Supreme Court later overturned their convictions and ordered a retrial. Before that could happen,

though, McCall shot them both. Shepherd died at the scene, but Irvin — who played dead — survived, and his sentence was later commuted to life in prison.

The saga of the men who became known as the “Groveland Four” has spanned nearly seven decades, tarnished the reputation of the town that endorsed it, inspired a revelatory, [Pulitzer Prize-winning book](#) and became the subject of an [online petition](#) demanding that Gov. Rick Scott formally exonerate all four.

After 68 years, and several previous failed attempts, the state of Florida has finally found the words that justice had been waiting on all this time: “We’re truly sorry.”

On the floor of the Florida House of Representatives on Tuesday, lawmakers unanimously passed a resolution apologizing to the families of the “Groveland Four” and exonerating the men. It also calls on Scott to expedite the process for granting posthumous pardons.

None of the “Groveland Four” are still living.

“This resolution is us simply saying ‘We’re sorry’ understanding that we will never know nor be able to make up for the pain we have caused,” [said](#) Rep. Bobby DuBose, a bill sponsor, [according to the Miami Herald](#).

Then he asked House members to stand and face relatives of the “Groveland Four” who were present.

“As the state of Florida and the House of Representatives,” DuBose said, “we’re truly sorry.”

The formal acknowledgment of the case, now widely considered a racial injustice, has been years in the making. A book by author Gilbert King, “[Devil in the Grove: Thurgood Marshall, the Groveland Boys, and the Dawn of a New America](#),” revived interest in the decades-old case and unearthed new evidence from once redacted FBI files that cast doubt on Padgett’s version of events.

Then in 2015, after reading King’s book in a college history class, University of Florida student Josh Venkataraman was driving from Orlando back to campus when he passed the road sign for the city of Groveland.

The book had “touched him,” he [told](#) a Miami Herald columnist in 2015, but seeing the physical place made it real.

He reached out to Carole Greenlee, the late Charles Greenlee’s daughter, who was living in Nashville, and asked if he could help.

At first the woman was skeptical, but eventually gave Venkataraman her permission to start a petition.

“I’m in the mode of trying to get my father exonerated,” she told the Herald years ago, “and I need all the help I can get.”

“[Exonerate the Groveland Four](#)” was born, and in the two years since has garnered nearly 9,000 signatures.

Venkataraman was at the statehouse Tuesday and said on his social media that “he couldn’t be happier for the family members of the Groveland Four who have become like family to me.”

Carole Greenlee, now 67, and her brother, Thomas, 52, were also in Tallahassee for the apology.

“Today, a part of it is forgiveness. And he would feel good about that,” she said of her father, [reported](#) the Associated Press. “This means that something positive has come out of something so wrong and so negative and so bad.”

Carole Greenlee was in her mother’s womb when her father was accused of raping Padgett. He had been in Lake County that day looking for a job, a way to provide for his young family.

After his conviction, his wife would bring the infant Carole for visits every Sunday, but eventually the became too difficult.

Carole didn’t see her father again until he was paroled in 1962. She was a pre-teen.

The family moved to Tennessee, where Carole still lives.

“Daddy never talked about it. It was such a painful time for him, but I had to know for myself, so I asked him about it one day,” Carole [told](#) the Daily Commercial last month. “He told me that he never knew the person he was accused of raping. He said the first time he even knew what was actually going on and the first time he ever saw her [Padgett] was when he was in court being tried.”

Greenlee did not appeal his conviction, [according to PBS](#), and spent 12 years in prison. He died in 2012 at age 78.

Shepherd and Irvin, however, did appeal, and although the Florida Supreme Court initially upheld their convictions, the U.S. Supreme Court unanimously overturned them.

They were shot by McCall on their return trip from prison to Lake County, where a new trial awaited them.

McCall claimed the nighttime trip took a turn when he pulled over to check a tire and let Irvin go to the bathroom, [reported PBS](#). Outside the car, Irvin and Shepherd — who were handcuffed together — tried to overpower the sheriff, McCall said, so he shot them.

Irvin, the only one to survive, told a different story.

He claimed the bullets were fired in cold blood after McCall pulled over and forced the two men out of the car, according to the PBS account. McCall shot both men, then bragged on the radio that he had “got rid of them,” Irvin alleged.

A local newspaper reporter told PBS he saw McCall later, and the sheriff had a bumped head and was bleeding. The coroner later cleared McCall.

In his second trial, Irvin was represented by future Supreme Court Justice Thurgood Marshall, but was once again convicted after a speedy deliberation. They appealed again, but the U.S. Supreme Court denied the case. The governor at the time also rejected a clemency appeal and scheduled Irvin’s execution.

But an emergency stay saved his life, and a newly elected moderate governor commuted Irvin’s sentence to life in prison after commissioning a report on the case.

Irvin was released in 1968 and died two years later, officially of a heart attack, on a trip back to Lake County for a funeral.

In 2016, both the city of Groveland and Lake County offered apologies to the men and their families and began lobbying state lawmakers to do the same.

On Tuesday, Florida house members also unanimously passed a resolution apologizing to another group of victims gone long unacknowledged — those who as children were abused in the 1950s and 1960s at the Dozier School for Boys, a reform school.

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