

MARTYR

FOR A

CAUSE

By

GLOSTER B. CURRENT

● **The Story of the Christmas
Night Bomb Assassination of
Harry T. Moore**



Courtesy Pittsburgh Courier

A MOTHER'S GRIEF—*Mrs. Rosa A. Moore, mother of the martyred Harry T. Moore, hate-bomb victim. "A grief without pang, void, dark and drear; a stifled, drowsy, unimpassioned grief, which finds no natural outlet, no relief, in word, or sigh, or tear."*

■ How the late Harry T. Moore served his race for many years with a passion for anonymity

Martyr for a Cause

By **Gloster B. Current**

Greater love hath no man than this, that a man lay down his life for his friends.

St. John 15:13

DECEMBER twenty-fifth in Florida, U.S.A., Nineteen Hundred and Fifty-One will go down in history as a night of infamy. While the world sang carols of "Peace and Good-will", the news broke of the horrible bombing of the home of Harry T. Moore in Mims. The blast shattered more than the holiday calm. It shocked the entire world into realization that mob violence, Florida variety, does not stop even on Christmas Night. The death of Moore at the hands of cowardly, unknown, heartless and cruel assassins once again pointed up the continuing wide disparity between the American profession of democratic ideals, and the actual practice of denial of civil rights in so many parts of the nation.

The 46-year-old NAACP leader and his 49-year old wife, Harriet, were asleep in the front bedroom of

their small four-room cottage which lies deep in a small orange grove owned by the Moores just off U.S. Highway No. 1. His mother, Mrs. Rosa A. Moore, and a daughter were sleeping in the back of the house. The family was together for the brief holidays as was their custom. For during most of the year, Moore traveled extensively for the NAACP and his wife, mother and daughter were employed by school systems in other sections of the state. Christmas presents lay unopened in the parlor. They were to be opened the next day after the arrival of another daughter from Washington, D.C.

The force of the explosion blew the Moores and their bed to the roof. Hearing the blast, Sgt. George Sims, brother of Mrs. Moore, came running from his home nearby and dug the wounded couple out of the debris. He drove them in an automobile to the nearest hospital in Sanford. Moore was pronounced dead upon arrival. His wife, suffering critical internal injuries, survived for several days and, after appearing to be recovering, suffered a relapse and died suddenly January 2 two days after the burial of her hus-

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Wide World

MRS. HARRIET MOORE
1902—January 3, 1952

band. Mrs. Moore had told reporters she had nothing to live for after her husband's death.

Moore served his race for many years with a passion for anonymity. He was given in death a well-deserved recognition for his contribution to the advancement of the Negro, a recognition denied him in life. He was quiet, soft-spoken, self-effacing. No one could have associated him with the bombastic, militant type of crusader who is stereotyped in the minds of many white Southerners as a "trouble-maker." Some of the finest tributes paid him came from

the very local authorities who during his lifetime had told him he was trying to go "too fast."

BASIS FOR TRAGEDY

Why did anyone want to kill him? What was the basis of this terrible tragedy?

The answer to these questions lies in his activity with the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People in Florida. Moore, during a seventeen year period of activity with the NAACP, worked persistently as a volunteer and paid worker for full equality for Negroes in Florida and elsewhere. He served the Association, first as president and organizer of the Brevard county branch, 1934-1939; president of the Florida State Conference, 1941 to 1946; executive secretary of the Conference, 1946, until November 1951, when he assumed the duties of State Coordinator of Branches. He wore out at least three automobiles covering the state from end to end. He visited, talked, organized, planned, investigated lynchings, denials of the franchise, police brutality, held conferences and workshops and did the hundreds of little and thankless jobs which are the duties of an organizer.

Shortly after the Brevard county branch was organized, Edward Reeves, one of the charter members, was killed in an altercation with a white man. Reeves went to a sawmill to collect a debt from one George Holden, Negro witnesses contended that Reeves was struck from behind and slain by a piece of timber in the hands of John L. Conrad, a bystander. A coroner's warrant from

the justice of peace was issued against Conrad, charging him with murder in the first degree and a warrant was also issued against Holden charging him with being an accomplice. Both men posted bond to appear before the grand jury, but, as so often happens in such cases, the state's witnesses, mostly Negroes, disappeared.

When no further action was taken at the spring term of court, Moore got in touch with the NAACP national office, which advised the retention of an attorney. Attorney M. C. McGregor, white, who agreed to help the branch, reported, after several efforts, that his investigation was hampered by indifference on the part of local authorities and the disappearance of the witnesses.

The murderers of Reeves were never brought to justice. But Harry Moore kept on fighting and remembering not only that incident, but many others about which he tried to obtain justice.

ORGANIZES STATE CONFERENCE

Shortly after the organization of the Brevard county branch in 1934, Moore wrote the national office citing the need for a state conference to better coordinate the fight against exclusion of Negroes from Democratic primaries and for equalization of teachers' salaries.

The conference was formally organized in 1941, with Moore as the first state president. It grew from nine branches to a peak of seventy-seven branches in 1947. Realizing the need for a full time worker, the State Conference in 1946 employed Moore as the executive sec-



Wide World

HARRY T. MOORE

November 18, 1905—December 25, 1951

retary. Because of his militant activity with the Brevard county branch and the State Conference, he lost his teaching job in 1945. His wife, Harriet, also was not reappointed and failed to secure another teaching post until 1948.

Raising money to finance the state work was at all times a difficult task and the conference was constantly hampered by a lack of funds. As a result of the inability of the conference to pay Mr. Moore his salary and because of the decline in branch membership in Florida in 1950 and 1951, the conference decided it could no longer finance a full-time executive secretary. Moore was then named Coordinator of Branches



Wide World

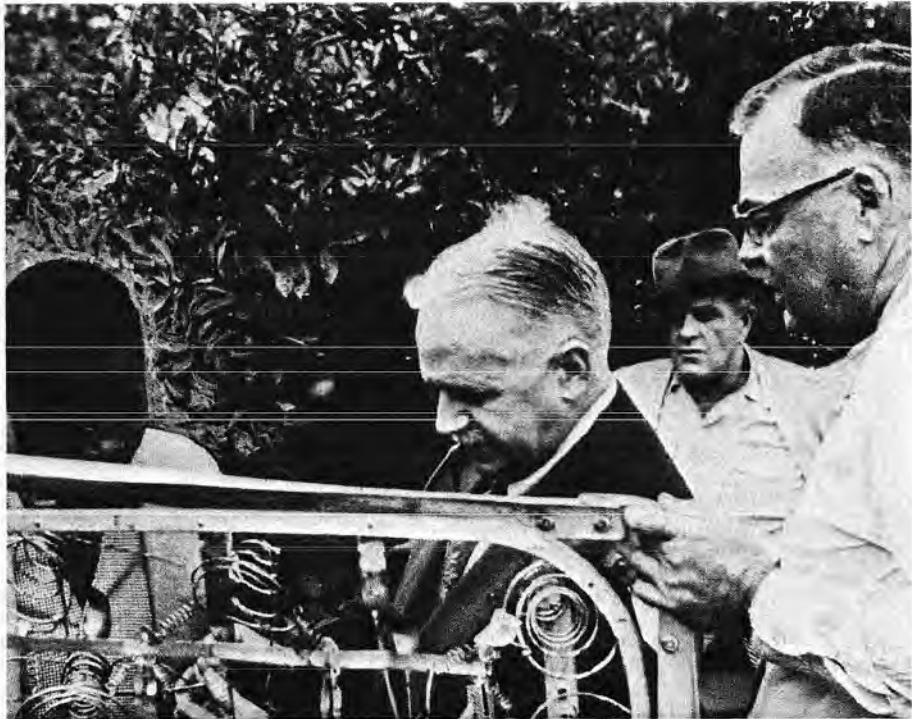
EFFECTS OF BOMB BLAST—*Damaged cottage of Harry T. Moore at Mims, Florida. The Christmas night blast completely wrecked the dwelling.*

at the state meeting which met in Daytona Beach, November, 1951, and a new financial program was in process of being developed at the time of his death.

TEACHERS SALARY CASES

In 1937, Moore began laying the groundwork for the fight to equalize teachers salaries, along with Noah Griffin and other Negro teachers in Florida. Moore wrote Charles Hou-

ston, then NAACP special council, that the state appropriated annually \$800 for each instruction unit, based on average attendance. "Each county is supposed to supplement this state money to provide a decent salary for teachers. In one county, however, and in most counties of Florida, Negro teachers are not paid even all the money the state sends out for their salaries. Every Negro teacher in this county, principals in-



Courtesy Pittsburgh Courier

WALTER WHITE (center), executive secretary of the NAACP, examines ruins of Moore home with Paul Perkins (left), Florida NAACP attorney, and local officials.

cluded, received less than \$800 last year. This and other gross discriminations exist, even though the state constitution provides that 'impartial provisions shall be made for white and Negro children'."

Moore made contacts with Attorney S. D. McGill of Jacksonville, who was retained to fight the cases. He also enlisted the aid of the Florida State Teachers Association and Noah W. Griffin.

On May 24, 1938, a petition was filed by Attorney McGill and NA-

ACP lawyers in behalf of John Gilbert, member of the executive committee of the Brevard county branch, a teacher and principal in the Cocoa Junior High School of Brevard county, seeking establishment of equal salary schedules for white and colored teachers. Principal Gilbert, holding a second grade certificate from the state department of education and in his eleventh year of teaching, was receiving a total of \$738 per year. White teaching principals were receiving above \$900 per

year. This case was the first in the Deep South and was watched keenly by other states.

Florida school boards sought to hinder the NAACP's program by intimidating the Negro principals and teachers through dismissals of principals and supporters of teachers' salary cases. Gilbert was dismissed by the county board of public instruction shortly after the NAACP filed suit in his behalf. Noah W. Griffin, president of the St. Petersburg branch and also president of the Florida State Teachers Association, principal of Gibbs High School in St. Petersburg, was also dismissed in June, 1938.

DECISION AFFIRMED

The Supreme Court of Florida affirmed the decision of the lower court of Brevard county in the Gilbert case, denying a writ of mandamus to compel the school board to equalize salaries on the grounds that there was no statutory provision requiring salary schedules. Despite this setback, the fight for equalization continued.

In January, 1940, a suit was filed in behalf of Vernon McDaniels, of Escambia county, principal of the Washington High School. The school board made a very weak answer to the complaint, and, after the lower court refused to dismiss the case, negotiated with McDaniels and the other plaintiffs without the knowledge of NAACP attorneys. The county agreed to equalize the salaries gradually until 1943. Thereafter all salaries would be equal.

As a result of the work of the NAACP, the salaries of Negro teachers in Florida were steadily increased.

Moore considered voting to be "a fundamental privilege; and if Negroes can just retain the right to vote in the primaries of Florida, we shall be well on the way toward solving some of the most serious problems that have faced us during the past fifty years," he said in a brief report on the work of the NAACP in Florida at the Southeastern Regional Conference in Charleston, South Carolina, March 29, 1947.

POLITICAL ACTION

When the United States Supreme Court handed down its decision in the Texas Primary Case in 1944, Moore and Negro leaders in Florida immediately launched a political action program. He helped organize the Progressive Voters League of Florida in 1944. Its aim, as stated by Moore, was as follows:

To get the democratic primary open to Negro voters in every county in Florida; (2) to encourage the masses of our people to register and vote; (3) to make contact with the various candidates and to make recommendations to our voters on the basis of the candidate's recommendations and attitudes.

Moore was employed as executive secretary of the new organization. In this capacity he sounded out candidates on issues, mailed questionnaires to candidates seeking the nomination for important federal offices, asking them to make clear their stand on issues vital to the Negro. After careful consideration, the League then recommended candidates to the Negro voters of the state.

Very often Moore's group was presented with a Hobson's choice. For example, in 1946 Moore ex-

plained to co-workers the difficulty of selecting a candidate to support for senator. Many members of the board expressed the opinion that Mrs. Polly Rose Balfe was the most liberal of the four candidates in the field. However, it was the general opinion of the board that the real race would be between Spessard L. Holland and Lex Green. And since Green has publicly announced his intention to "champion the cause of the white democratic primary and of the noble traditions of the white south," the board voted to endorse the candidacy of Spessard L. Holland. Holland was elected but did not prove to be an advocate of civil rights.

CIVIL RIGHTS

In January, 1950, in identical letters to Senators Claude Pepper and Spessard Holland, Moore called attention to recent statements by President Truman and Democratic leaders in Congress promising that civil-rights legislation would be among the first matters considered. He reminded the senators of the Groveland case and how the Negro defendants "were brutally beaten by local officers but no action has been taken on this charge. If local authorities refused to act on such cases, surely the federal government should be empowered to come in and mete out justice." Citing the keen desire of Florida Negro citizens for the passage of "effective civil rights legislation," the senators were urged to support civil-rights bills in that session.

Holland, in his reply to Moore, argued against the civil-rights pro-

gram, placing great emphasis on state's rights—the right of Florida and other states "to control within their own borders such matters as law enforcement, qualification of voters, employment practices and education."

MOORE REBUTTAL

In rebuttal, Moore answered his arguments:

This is the core of our argument. Since the days of Reconstruction the doctrine of 'states rights' has been used against the Negro in the South. In retaining and exercising the powers mentioned above, the southern states have been very unfair to Negro citizens. In cases where whites and Negroes are involved, law enforcement in Florida and other southern states is usually very one-sided.

When the Groveland, Florida, Negroes were accused of rape last July, a special session of the grand jury was called, and the men were indicted, tried and convicted in short order. Seven months have passed since a mob of white people terrorized these innocent Negroes around Groveland and burned three of their homes to ashes, but no special grand jury has been called to investigate these crimes against Negroes. These are some good examples of the type of 'law enforcement' that we get in southern states when whites and Negroes are involved.

In the same way he outlined arguments in support of federal civil-rights laws:

This same unfair situation exists in the matter of qualification of voters. The southern states have used, and are still using, various unfair methods to disfranchise Negro citizens. Even in Florida there are still some counties where Negroes are kept from voting by intimidation. Although Negroes con-

prise almost half of the population of Madison county, not one Negro was registered to vote there in 1948. No Negroes were registered in Lafayette, Liberty, and Hendry counties.

Union county, with 1025 Negroes old enough to vote, had only one registered. In 1948 a few Negroes in Gadsden county insisted on voting against the 'advice' of the precinct clerk and other local whites. That same night the home of one of those Negroes was blasted with dynamite, and another Negro had to flee with his family to New Jersey. No arrests have been made by local officers.

Indicating how cogently he could argue against the reference made by Southerners to race tension in the North exceeding that in the South, Moore said:

The bare fact is that Negroes in many southern communities are so thoroughly suppressed and intimidated by local whites that they are afraid to raise a hand in their own defense. (I make this statement as a Negro who has lived in Florida all of his life.) We have had cases where Negroes were even afraid to initiate legal action against whites who had murdered or mistreated members of their own families. The grandson of a Negro in my home was almost killed by a convict guard a few years ago. When we offered to assist the grandfather in having some legal steps taken, his reply was: 'Well, I've got to live here with these white folks. So I guess I better not bother with that.' When Jesse James Payne was taken at gun point from his wife and sister by three white men in 1949, the Negro family had no thought of retaliating or trying to help him. Their first thought was to try to get out of Madison county.

The same thing was true with the parents of Willie James Howard, the 15-year-old Negro boy of Live Oak,

Florida, who was snatched from his mother by three white men on the first Sunday in January, 1944, during your term as Governor [Caldwell] and drowned in the Suwannee River. The parents practically gave their home away and left that county. In plain words, the odds are stacked so heavily against Negroes in the South that most of us 'go out of our way' to avoid trouble with white people. We often yield our rights and even suffer severe injuries and insults at the hands of white people in our efforts to avoid racial trouble. Negroes in most states outside of the South enjoy more freedom, and they are usually ready to stand their ground and strike back when whites attempt to trample their rights.

MOB VIOLENCE

Much of Moore's efforts were devoted to the investigation of lynchings, mob violence, and police brutality. He investigated the lynching of Jesse James Payne, October, 1945. Some indication of the reason why the NAACP opposed the appointment of former Governor Millard Caldwell, Jr., as Director of Civilian Defense, can be found in Moore's report on the Jesse Payne case. Commenting on the failure of former Governor Caldwell to act, Moore said:

Frankly we were disappointed at the attitude of our Governor in this matter. Either he was not particularly concerned about the murder of a Negro or he was unable to fully appreciate the seriousness of the situation.

When Governor Caldwell won a suit for damages in a libel action against *Collier's Magazine* as a result of editorial censure of his alleged statements and lack of effective action in the lynching of J. J.

Payne, the Governor turned the award of \$237,500 over to the Florida A & M College of Tallahassee. In a sharply worded letter to Caldwell, Moore informed him that Florida Negroes would not consider the money as a gift. Criticizing Governor Caldwell for the failure to suspend the Sheriff, Moore said:

We wish to make it clear that we shall not consider this as a gift to the Negroes of Florida. Florida A & M College is a state-supported institution. The support and development of this school is the responsibility of the state of Florida. If Florida A & M College is not getting sufficient financial support to make it measure up to the standards maintained at the University at Tallahassee, it is the fault of our state government, and not the responsibility of Florida Negro citizens. Therefore, any money that you give will be a contribution to our state government, and not a gift to the Negroes of Florida. We wish also to emphasize the fact that such a gift will not soothe the wounded feelings of Florida Negro citizens. We are still disappointed because of your failure to take effective action in the Payne lynching.

GROVELAND CASE

On July 16, 1949, occurred the incident which may have been the ultimate cause of Moore's death. Mrs. Willie Padgett claimed that four Negroes raped her that morning and as a result of her accusations, Samuel Shepherd, then 22; Walter Lee Irvin, also 22; and Charles Greenlee, 16, were arrested. Ernest Thomas ran away and was killed in a swamp near the town of Perry by the sheriff's posse. The three Negroes were arrested and charged with rape. Violence flared in Groveland. A howl-

ing shooting mob swarmed through the Negro sections. Three homes were burned to the ground and 400 Negroes were forced to flee from the sawmill community.

The NAACP sent Franklin H. Williams, then assistant special counsel, to the scene and as a result of his report the association entered the case. The case was tried in a hostile atmosphere in Lake county, Florida. The United States Supreme Court reversed the decisions of the lower court and ordered the case retried in an opinion handed down in April, 1951. In the majority opinion, Justice Robert H. Jackson excoriated the press of central Florida for bias and inflammatory handling of the case. The press had so influenced the jury, said Jackson

. . . that the conclusion is inescapable that these defendants were prejudged as guilty and the trial was but a legal gesture to register a verdict already dictated by the press and the public opinion which it generated.

Moore spearheaded the campaign in behalf of the case throughout the state, raising funds, writing letters, visiting branches and holding conferences with public officials. When Sheriff Willis McCall of Lake county killed Samuel Shepherd, one of the Groveland defendants, and seriously wounded Walter Lee Irvin, in November, 1951 Moore was active in seeking to bring about the indictment and prosecution of McCall.

Florida branches, at the call of Moore, demanded action to punish the sheriff. The NAACP State Coordinator spoke at NAACP meetings and circulated petitions demanding justice. He reminded Gov-

ernor Warren that in 1949 the Florida NAACP had asked that the prisoners not be permitted to leave Rayford (State Penitentiary) without a special guard.

Less than two months after the murder of Samuel Shepherd, occur-

red another death in Florida, that of Harry T. Moore, an outstanding leader, a fearless crusader for justice. Why would anyone want to murder him? The answer lies in his continued fight for justice and his willingness to sacrifice himself for a cause.

....., 19. . .

N.A.A.C.P.
20 West 40th Street
New York 18, N. Y.

I enclose \$..... as a contribution to the NAACP to assure that Mr. and Mrs. Harry T. Moore shall not have lied in vain, and that violence and discrimination shall not continue in Florida or elsewhere in the nation.

I wish to become a member of the NAACP and enclose \$.....

Name

Address

City and State

Annual Membership \$2.00, \$3.50, \$5.00, \$10.00 & up. Youth Membership (under 21), \$.50. Life Membership \$500. Memberships of \$3.50 and up include a year's subscription to *The Crisis* Magazine at \$1.50.

Harry T. Moore Memorial Membership, \$5.00.

May, 1952