

Dedicating headstones

City to memorialize lynching victims, acknowledge graves

By Susan Hogan/Albach
News-Tribune staff writer

"I have heard a man say the only thing he regretted about the lynching affair was that those negroes were buried and thereby spoiled a perfectly good piece of ground."

Letter to Editor, Duluth Herald, 1920

Seventy-one years after a Duluth mob lynched three black circus workers, the city will memorialize the victims by dedicating headstones and, for the first time, will publicly acknowledge their graves.

"Deterred but not defeated" read the newly erected headstones of Elias

Clayton, Isaac McGhie and Elmer Jackson,

DEDICATION

A procession will leave the Central Hillside Community Center, 12 E. Fourth St. at 12:15 p.m. today for the 1 p.m. ceremony in Park Hill Cemetery, 2500 Vermont Road.

whose recently located graves are in a flat, grassy area of Park Hill Cemetery in the Hunter's Park neighborhood.

The procession of hate-filled people that dragged the victims from their jail cells, then beat and hanged them in 1920, will be countered today by a peaceful procession to the cemetery beginning at 12:15 p.m. at the Central Hillside Community Center, 12 E. Fourth St. The dedication begins at 1 p.m.

The Rev. Rolf Olson, pastor of First Lutheran Church, and several dignitaries will speak at the service. First Lutheran owned the Norwegian Lutheran cemetery at the time of the lynching and ensured the victims' burial despite the explosive climate.

"There was so much hate that nobody could have stopped those nuts," said Elmer Glenn, who was 14 years old in 1920. Glenn is the only member

of Duluth's black community known to have lived here at the time of the lynchings.

"We were scared," he said. "There was a lot of talk that the whites were going to wipe out all the blacks."

The atmosphere was so volatile then that Minnesota's governor sent the state militia here to keep order and protect the city's 495 blacks. About 750 blacks now live in Duluth, according to census reports.

Today's ceremony is an outcry against the racial violence that continues here as evidenced in February when two predominantly black churches were spray painted with ra-

cial epithets.

But it is also a tribute to the stalwart individuals whose words and actions challenge racist behaviors and attitudes. In the wake of the 1920 lynchings, newspaper accounts describe clergy "as the most fearless" in battling racism, including:

■ The Rev. W. J. Powers, a Catholic priest who climbed the light pole where the lynchings would occur and pleaded with the crowd, estimated at 5,000 to 10,000 people. At the same time, his colleague, the Rev. P. J. Masonry, walked through the mob begging individuals to end the violence.

"Let the law take its course," Pow-

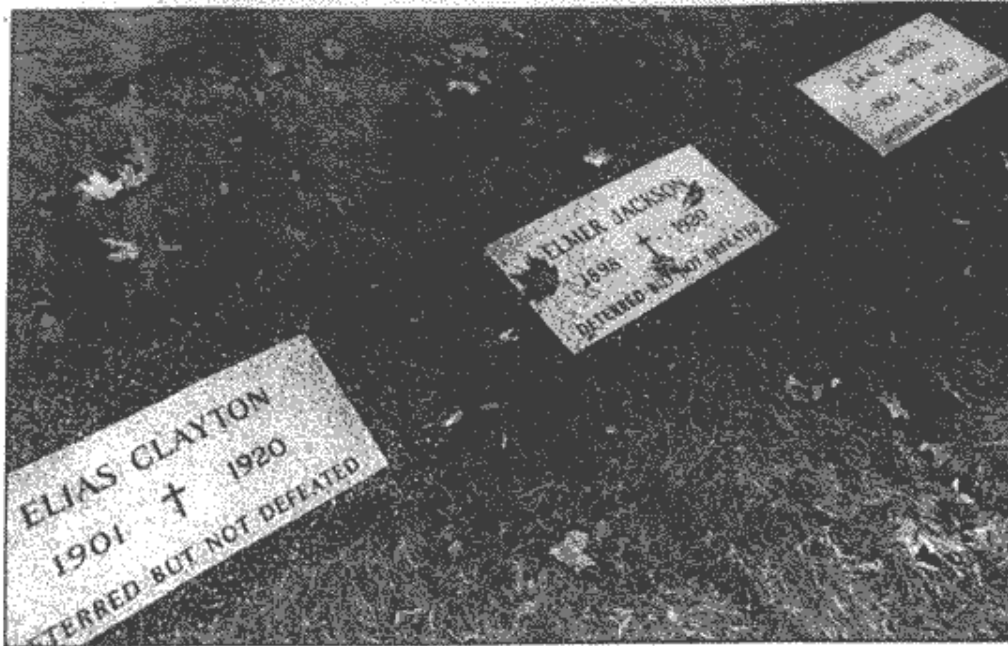
ers cried. "In the name of God and the church I represent, men, I ask you to stop."

■ The Rev. George Brewer, pastor of First Presbyterian Church, who offered an impassioned sermon titled "Why These Crimes and Lynchings" in which he condemned the hangings.

■ The Rev. A. W. Ryan, rector of St. Paul's Episcopal Church, who joined with Duluth's Kiwanis Club in publicly denouncing the lynchings.

"We trust that every good man and true will lift up his voice in bitter condemnation of such a disgraceful act,"

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Bob King/News-Tribune

Grave markers for the three men who were lynched by a Duluth mob in 1920 are in place in Park Hill Cemetery.

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he said. "Duluth now stands shamed in the eyes of the world."

No public statements are recorded from members of First Lutheran Church, who instead quietly saw to the victims' burial.

"Somebody made the decision to welcome into this white, Scandinavian cemetery three black men who had suffered such indignity," Olson said. "This effort now to dignify the very undignified death of these men by putting gravestones there, builds on a tradition of compassion that was manifested in 1920 by the decision to move the bodies to Park Hill Cemetery."

Many believed the victims were buried in a potter's field near the old Cook Home in Duluth Heights until last summer's debate over a proposed jail there. After it was learned the victims were in unmarked graves at Park Hill, an effort was initiated by members of First Lutheran Church and the Duluth Chapter of the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People to erect headstones.

Today's ceremony is in conjunction with the NAACP's annual freedom fund banquet, which begins at 6 p.m. in the Holiday Inn, 200 W. First St. The 1920 lynchings led to the beginning of the Duluth NAACP branch.

"The markers bring closure to a tragic event and are a painful reminder of racial violence," said Bob Baldwin, Duluth's NAACP president. "Unfortunately, racism is still prevalent in our society and in this

community."

Craig Grau, a member of First Lutheran Church, initiated the effort that led to the installment of markers. The University of Minnesota-Duluth political science professor has compiled additional research about the event that isn't documented in the only book written about the violence, Michael Fedo's "They Was Just Niggers."

The deaths of the circus workers for a crime doctors' reports indicate never happened was felt nationwide, and its impact is still being measured.

The mob violence led the Minnesota Legislature to pass anti-lynching laws. Elisha Scott, a black lawyer from Topeka, Kan., who tried unsuccessfully to sue the Duluth Police Department on behalf of a victim's father, was later involved in a landmark case in which the Supreme Court ruled that racial segregation in public schools was unconstitutional.

Roy Wilkins, then a student at the University of Minnesota, said of the Duluth lynchings in his autobiography: "I lost my innocence on race once and for all." Wilkins later became executive secretary of the national NAACP.

Closer to home, Alfred Weinberg of Duluth, who was 12 when he witnessed the lynchings, said the event shaped his law career as an adult. Weinberg said he often took on black clients without charging a fee.

"It was a terrible thing to see, particularly for a youngster," said Weinberg, who is now retired. "I was never the same and developed very strong views about the rights of minorities."