

The Curator Says... Bill Lee describes growing up in Alabama's rural Black Belt, where his family settled in the 1820s. His account is rich with personal connections from childhood, all told from a slow-moving, pastoral perspective. His main concern, however, centers on the troubled relations between the whites and the blacks nearby, questions of justice, racism, and poverty, but especially the brutal violence inflicted on black people.

Taking a Stand in Bloody Lowndes

Bill Lee

I turned six years old in August of 1954. We—Momee (my paternal grandmother), Mother, Dad, and my younger twin brothers, Ernest and Elbert, lived at Momee's house on Rogers Street in Fort Deposit, Ala. Mother was pregnant with my brother Robert, who was born September 11, 1954. My sister, Susan, was not born until 1957.

It was shortly after my birthday that it was time for me to enter first grade at Lowndes County High School, which included grades 1-12 in a U-shaped building with the library in the middle.

The first day of school was a great day for me. The sun was shining and there were only a few clouds in the sky. I packed my "book satchel" and swung it onto my back with the long strap across my chest and hopped on my new brown 16"-wheel bicycle. I rode from Momee's house up the sidewalk and past the neighbor's houses—Miss Lula Priester's, Mr. and Mrs. Norman Rahn's, then turned the corner past Parker Edwards', onward past Bethel Baptist Church, past Mr. and Mrs. Hence Ellis', past Mr. and Mrs. Roland's and Frances Redden's, turned right past Mr. and Mrs. Henry's and Josephine Crenshaw's and on to the school. I pretended to pay no attention to my parents driving their light blue Dodge station wagon down the street beside me.

As I recall, my first grade classmates included Clayton Bush, Butch Cates, Mark Coleman, Larry Conway, Bob Dixon, Jane Ellis, Clyde Heartsill, Trudy Kirschenfeld, Justin Martindale, Sue Moorer, Larry Payne, Sandra Perdue, Sylvia Skipper and Ronnie Wilkinson. All except one went through all twelve grades together and graduated in 1966. That year we read books like *See Spot Run*. We learned to write our names and to write lots of words on tablets with a lot of space between the lines. Our teacher, Mrs. Grace Dial, used a device with four sticks of chalk to draw a pattern on the chalkboard similar to the one in our tablets. We wrote our names on yellow curtains that hung in our classroom. We took naps each day on pallets our parents made from oilcloth. Mrs. Dial was a very good and compassionate teacher. I enjoyed reading, writing, arithmetic, recess, nap time and lunch. It was all a great adventure for me.

My ancestors migrated from Charleston to Dutch Bend in Lowndes County in 1820, ten years before the county was formed in 1830 and seventy years before the Alabama Constitution of 1901 was adopted. The county is located just south of Montgomery and just east of Selma. Hayneville is the county seat, and Fort Deposit is the largest town, with a

population of 1,500 in 1954. County population declined from a high of about 35,000 in 1900 to about 15,000 in 1954 due to the boll weevil making cotton farming difficult, the mechanization of farming, racial violence, and the great migration to northern and mid-western industrial cities.

In 1954, Lowndes County and Fort Deposit were approximately 80% black and 20% white. Eighty-six white families owned 90% of the land. As a white six-year-old, I experienced life as portrayed in Mayberry, N. C., on *The Andy Griffith Show*, which aired in 1960 and, at that time, I never thought about where the black six-year olds went to school. In 1954 I was too young to understand much about the beginning of the Civil Rights Movement with the U.S. Supreme Court's *Brown v. Board of Education of Topeka* decision that year. I remember being told about the 1955 Montgomery Bus Boycott, but my understanding of it came when I was older.

By 1960 when the sit-ins at segregated southern lunch counters began, I was old enough to understand how unjustly black residents of Lowndes County were being treated. I was fifteen at the time of the August 1963 March on Washington, D. C., when Dr. King made his famous "I Have a Dream" speech and just three months later when President John F. Kennedy was assassinated. I was sixteen when the 24th Amendment abolished the poll tax and the first black residents of Lowndes County registered to vote shortly thereafter. I was seventeen at the time of the 1965 Pettus Bridge "Bloody Sunday" in Selma, less than fifty miles from Fort Deposit, and when Tom Coleman murdered two ministers in Hayneville, the county seat of Lowndes County.

I was still seventeen on the night of March 25, 1965, when Viola Liuzzo, a Michigan mother of five, was shot and killed by Klansmen as she drove down Highway 80 through Lowndes County with a black civil rights worker. There are fourteen documented cases of black residents being lynched in Lowndes County, equal to the highest per capita of any county in Alabama. Seven lynchings were in Letohatchee, five in 1900, and two in 1917. Bryan Stevenson, the founder of the Equal Justice Initiative and the author of the book, *Just Mercy*, posted a historical marker in Letohatchee on July 31, 2016.

In high school, I was a member of Bethel Baptist Church in Fort Deposit. In 1967, when I was nineteen and a sophomore at Auburn University, I was asked by the pastor to make a short speech to the Sunday congregation about college and my faith. The following was my speech:

Students at Auburn and on most college campuses have a high degree of freedom. There's no one to regulate our activities, to tell us who we can date, where we can go and for the boys—when we have to be back.

Of course, to remain in school we must be involved academically, but any other involvement is our own choice. We can do nothing except eat, sleep, study, and go to class. I prefer a high degree of involvement. I enjoy student government work and many social activities.

At a recent church service in Auburn the pastor asked this question, "What things do you do or refrain from doing because and only because you're a Christian?"

Well, I don't cheat on exams because I don't want to get caught. I don't smoke because Dad smokes and I think it's harmful to his body. I don't gamble because I know the odds are that I'll lose. I don't lie because I'm not smart enough to cover it up.

You can be a moral person under the banner of the Civitan Club, Boy Scouts, or even the Future Homemakers of America.

But the thing that I do because and only because I'm a Christian is to try every day to treat each person I come in contact with equally --- no matter if their skin is black, brown, yellow or green, no matter what social class they are in, rich or poor, regardless of their education or intelligence.

When I meet St. Peter at the gates of heaven I don't believe he's going to ask me how many church services I've attended, or did I tithe, or how many prayer groups I joined. I think he's going to ask me what kind of relationship I had with you and you and you.

At the time, I didn't realize how dangerous it was to advocate treating black people as equals.

About three years later I was driving a truck and pulling a trailer loaded with my parents' old bed and other furniture on my way from Fort Deposit to Birmingham. My wife Lynn and I had rented our first apartment, and I was hauling furniture to furnish it.

I was traveling on County Road 37 in northern Lowndes County when a truck with a group of young white men riding in the back drove up beside me and forced me off the road near Letohatchee. The leader of the group said, "Roll down your window!" and I did so. He said, "You're in the wrong part of the county," then took a swing at me. His fist landed hard against my head, between my left ear and my left eye. I put the truck in gear, pressed the gas pedal and took off as fast as I could go.

At the time, I was not aware of the lynchings that took place just about fifty years earlier nor was I aware that they happened near the spot where I was attacked. However, I'll never forget how I feared for my life and how terribly frightened I was.

Bill Lee Says... I was born in Greenville, Alabama, and graduated from Lowndes County High School. I earned my B. S. in economics at Auburn University in 1970 and my M. S. in business at the University of Northern Colorado in 1974. After serving in the Air Force to fulfill my R.O.T.C. commitment, I worked for Burger King for 32 years before retiring in 2006. I married Linda Mobley in 1971, and we lived in seven states during the first seven years of our marriage. We have two married sons and two grandchildren, ages six and eight.