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The North not excluded from America's racist past

By Jeremiah Horrigan
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jhorrigan@th-record.com

If Northerners didn't have the South to kick around every now and then, we'd probably have to invent it. It's been said the South is the land of the burning cross, the segregationist senator, the redneck assassin. So when a powerful Southern politician like Trent Lott repents his sins, Northerners - especially white Northerners - can warm themselves in the knowledge that at least our people never did anything so heinous. Or did they?

You want cross-burnings? They used to light up the night at places like Snake Hill in Newburgh, Point Peter in Port Jervis and across the Delaware on Heaters Hill in Matamoras, Pa.

Lynchings? There are three recorded lynchings of black men in New York state. One took place in Buffalo. The other two happened in Newburgh and Port Jervis.

You think talk about the Klan is ancient history? Tell that to the woman who needed a police escort to escape a Pine Bush Board of Education meeting in the early '70s. The subject was open housing, and the president of the school board at the time was the wife of the grand dragon of the local and very active Ku Klux Klan "klavern."

Did someone say the Klan is ancient history? Fast forward from the '70s to 1999 and Town of Montgomery resident James Sheeley, the home-grown self-styled grand dragon of a newly spawned "branch" of the KKK.

Sheeley was the guy whose "white pride" demonstration in New York City drew 17 unmasked Klansmen and women and 6,000 outraged protesters. One such person, a 56-year-old white man, shouted "Death to the Klan" and socked Sheeley in the left eye.

Optimists can say Sheeley's puny turnout proved the Klan is as dead as the Confederate Civil War veterans who founded it. Pessimists can say the public manifestations of Klan rallies are only the tip of an iceberg of racial hatred that still floats beneath the American consciousness.

Pessimists can point to a Web site - hatedirectory.com - which tracks the proliferation of racial hate groups on the net. Print it out and you'll have 95 pages of fine-print cyber-hate.

If it's true that Southern-style segregation was a matter of benighted legislation, it's also true that in the North, segregation was de facto - in fact, regardless of legal definitions.

"I grew up on the Lower East Side and it was all de facto in the schools," says A. J. Williams-Myers, a professor of black studies at SUNY New Paltz.

"People have to realize it [racism] was largely a matter of custom and tradition in the North, of restrictive covenants in housing, for example."

Here's a quick glimpse of 1940s Monroe:

A small group of Jews had just converted a house on Stage Road into a temple and picked their first president. Not long afterward, locals burned the president in effigy on Lake Street.

"It made you feel uneasy," recalls Eric Nathan, one of the few Jews in Monroe then.

He and his wife, Erna, had seen worse. They were smuggled out of Germany during the Holocaust and were lucky to be alive. Most of their families, including both sets of parents, died in Hitler's gas chambers. The Nathans came to Monroe in 1943, moved to Central Valley in 1951 and have been there since.

Eric Nathan recalls some people wearing swastikas in this little community when he and his wife settled in Monroe. No one persecuted them or prevented Jews from gathering at their new temple, he says. But racism was obvious.

As Williams-Myers sees it, the poison of racism proceeds from the American experience of slavery and persists to this day. Again, it's a disease that's not limited to the South:

"The hands of the North are not clean - the residue of racism remains today."

White Americans, Williams-Myers says, live in a state of "historical amnesia."

"We've been told racism isn't as significant as it used to be, but it's more subtle than it ever was," he says. "Look at the drop-out rate, unemployment, the prison population, the health statistics. That's where you'll find African-Americans today."

Sure, Trent Lott was wrong. Condemn him. But then take a look at your own community. How many people of color hold positions of power?

"White America is in denial," he says, "and whenever memory comes into play, it's selective at best."

Staff writer Chris McKenna contributed to this report.