

Witnesses of lynching tell tales of fear, faith and forgiveness

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WACO —Eighty years ago, an 11-year-old African-American boy walked in the dark on an Alabama country road, listening for the sound of his uncle's truck and waiting for a promised ride home. But someone else came along, and the boy never forgot the terror of what happened next.

Angela Sims, assistant professor of ethics and black church studies at Saint Paul School of Theology in Kansas City, Mo., has conducted interviews with African-Americans who told how they narrowly escaped lynching, witnessed it or lived in fear of it. Those interviews will be housed at Baylor University's Institute for Oral History for public viewing and listening. (PHOTO/ Matthew Minard/Baylor University)

At first, Willie Thomas thought the men, carrying sickles and with their dogs tagging along, were hunting possums. Then one asked, "Hey, Boy. What you doing out here?"

So began a night of taunts, false accusations, the fashioning of a noose for Thomas' hanging—and the merciful intervention of a passerby.

In video and audio recordings being transcribed by [Baylor University](#) students and to be archived at Baylor, Thomas—now Elder Willie Thomas, 90, of Birmingham, Ala.—and more than 70 other people recount how they

narrowly escaped lynching, witnessed it or lived in fear of it.

Until now, not many African-Americans have been willing to speak openly about those experiences, said Angela Sims, assistant professor of ethics and black church studies at [Saint Paul School of Theology](#) in Kansas City, Mo. She conducted the interviews, which will be housed at Baylor's [Institute for Oral History](#) for public viewing and listening.

In her travels, she interviewed people—mostly elderly—across the country, in locations as diverse as Oakland, Calif.; Philadelphia; Richmond, Va.; Omaha, Neb.; and Bossier City, La.

No one, Sims said, can tell a story like the person who has lived it. As Sims listened to people relive their experiences, she felt their fear. But she also marveled at their faith and their forgiveness of atrocities.

Those first-person memories need to be preserved before it is too late, she said.

“Five of my interviewees have already passed,” Sims said.

Sims launched the project, called Remembering Lynching: Strategies of Resistance and Vision of Justice, in July 2009. She was preparing to defend her dissertation about lynching and decided to expand it into an oral history after she heard Wallace Hartsfield, a Missouri pastor and civil rights activist, give a first-person account of a Florida lynching he witnessed.

Carey Newman, director of Baylor University Press, introduced her to Stephen Sloan, director of Baylor's Institute for Oral History, in 2008, and she received training in interviewing at the institute.



Postcard of spectators at the lynching of Jesse Washington, May 16, 1916, in Waco.
(Photo/Withoutsanctuary.com)

Sims, an award recipient in the Ford Foundation Fellowship 2010 postdoctoral competition, is writing a book called *Conversations with Elders: African-Americans Remember Lynching*, based partially on her oral history interviews. It is scheduled to be published by Baylor University Press in 2012.

Sims quickly realized that “for me to even get through an interview, I’d have to take a very clinical approach. There are times I’ve not been able to mask my gut reaction. But I try to be stoic because I don’t want my reaction to become the narrative.”

So it was as she listened to Thomas.

The men who stopped him were drunk, Thomas told Sims in the videotaped interview. They cursed him, accused him of accosting a white woman and sicced their dogs on him.

“Great big old dogs,” Thomas remembered. “But those dogs jumped up on me and licked my hand and wagged their tails.”

Then one man, who carried a rope, made a noose.

“He said, ‘Let me try it on and see how it works,’” Thomas said. “He put it around my neck, and it was a grass rope—you know how they scratch. I was in pain. He pulled it and said, ‘Oh, it’s going to work . . . You see that big tree down there in the hollow? That would be a good place to hang him.’”

Then a passing driver stopped to investigate—a man who knew the Thomas family. The man brandished a shotgun at Thomas’ tormentors and urged Thomas to hush his crying.

The man vowed not to leave until the men turned Thomas loose. Thomas’ captors said they would do so only if the boy had told the truth when he said his uncle was coming to fetch him.

“My uncle’s truck—sometimes it would run; sometimes it wouldn’t,” Thomas said. “But finally, here comes the old truck, with one eye—one light— out, and his motor going boop-de-boop-de-boop-de-boop. You talk about ‘Swing Low, Sweet Chariot.’ . . . There was nothing but Jesus at that moment.”

Sims’ work to elicit such accounts “exemplifies what’s best about oral history,” Sloan said. “It’s recording some deep and very personal and powerful episodes some of these folks haven’t talked about in years.”

While some people equate lynching with hanging, it actually is defined as a mob’s murder of someone without a lawful trial for real or alleged crimes. To find interview subjects, Sims called on friends and acquaintances who might know those who had experienced close brushes with lynching. Those friends could vouch for Sims as trustworthy. Still, some people canceled interviews, fearing repercussions.

Baylor student transcribers said the accounts are eye-opening, heart-wrenching and, occasionally, uplifting.

"I'm hesitant to use a term like 'white guilt' to describe what I felt while listening to these interviews, but it was hard hearing about all the terrible things these people had to go through for no good reason at all," said Bethany Sellers, a senior graphic design major from Waco.

"There's no doubt that we've made significant progress concerning racial relations, but in this day and age, there's still a lot of racism, depending on where you are and how hard you look."

Ashley Yeaman, a junior journalism/anthropology major from Teague, was moved by the account of a man who, as a child, was hurried into a house by his grandmother so he would not see a lynching.

"Peering out the window, he saw a truck passing by with a body of a black man being dragged behind," Yeaman said. "Many of the accounts are equally horrific tales, as well as personal stories of discrimination and mistreatment as a typical part of everyday life. ... However, they also describe overcoming discrimination. One woman was one of four black school teachers who taught in all-white schools, heading the desegregation movement."

Hearing how interviewees persevered and their hopes for the future has been inspiring, said Priscilla Martinez, a senior history major from San Antonio.

"It's good to hear them speak optimistically and say, 'It's our legacy, but it's getting better,'" she said. "All the people I heard being interviewed have been very religious, and it's very uplifting when they conclude with that."

Thomas said in his interview that when he thinks of the white man who risked his own life to rescue a young boy: "It gives me a sense of forgiveness. I forgive those people."

He said he believes the oral history project will benefit the nation.

“Truth and forgiveness have to be the order of the day,” he said.