

Tribeca Film Festival: Lillie & Leander, A Legacy Of Violence

By Prairie Miller
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The United States is still very much a place where the horrific history of racial violence has long been buried. This stubbornly persistent national secret of the collective white consciousness whose surfaces have barely been penetrated, is concealed beneath layers of denial, shame and unindicted atrocities.

On occasion a courageous, daring and principled filmmaker like Marco Williams steps forward to challenge the complicit silence with raw truth and bold clarity in documentaries like *Banished*. Now director Jeffrey Morgan uncovers a barely hidden yet inexplicably unrecorded pattern of serial race killings and revenge that spanned a quarter century in the Pensacola, Florida region. Morgan, a Native American descended from the Fallon Paiute Tribe of Nevada, joined forces with Alice Brawton Hurwitz to craft the documentary, *LILLIE & LEANDER: A LEGACY OF VIOLENCE*. The film is currently being showcased at the Tribeca Film Festival in NYC.

Alice is the great great niece of Lillie Davis, a young mother who was brutally raped and shot to death in 1908, her skull crushed with the butt of a gun. The man arrested for the crime was Leander Shaw, a black laborer in the nearby turpentine camps. While detained at the city jail, Leander was grabbed from his cell by a vigilante mob who broke into the building, dragged up and down the main street, and hanged from a lamppost in the town plaza. Over 500 bullets were fired into his body, the force of the assault severing his head.

Alice has been haunted in the present day by far too many unanswered questions surrounding the incident, and she decided to pursue a new investigation through collaboration with Morgan on the documentary. What came to light in the course of making *LILLIE & LEANDER*, was the uncovering of sinister family secrets that Alice could never have imagined. Namely, a 25 year pattern of revenge serial killing and disappearances of black males, including boys and the elderly, who might pass along the country road by her family home. And it is the digging up of these killing fields by the road that is the dreaded core of the film.

The director visits with residents of the surrounding area, both black and white, who confirm suspicions long the stuff of local folklore. Including an incident where white children playing outside a church on Sunday, brought indoors a skull that they found in the woods. And adults told them to throw it back into the woods, because 'it's not a white skull.'

Also complicit in these Florida Panhandle race killings, and the lynching of Leander, was a shameful media that stoked the fires of race hatred with their rhetoric. Lines that screamed from the local papers and that would make the tabloid rags of today squirm, included 'A Turpentine Negro Brute, Typical Of His Kind.'

Another shocker that comes to light and intimates issues touching on concepts of humans as property to be exploited and discarded at will, whether based on race or gender, is that Lillie's husband may indeed have been the perpetrator, framing Leander to cover his own crimes. Her husband immediately married another woman upon Lillie's death, to the dismay of her family, while a second woman, a secret lover of his, was found brutally murdered in a similar fashion.

LILLIE & LEANDER raises many troubling questions, but finds few decisive answers to these lingering mysteries. Perhaps that persistent speculation is to its credit, not allowing audiences off so easily so that resolution, relief and ensuing complacency distract from the urgency of so much more that needs to be done.

Prairie Miller
WBAI Arts Magazine
Artsmagazine@juno.com