

Louisiana newspaper editor Stanley Nelson: Pulitzer-prize nominee a hero in fact and fiction

Written by By TERRY MATHEWS, News-Telegram Arts Editor
Tuesday, 05 August 2014 12:26



When *Concordia Sentinel* Editor Stanley Nelson published a story about the 1964 murder of a local black businessman he thought that was the end of it. The year was 2007.

The *Sentinel* is published in Ferriday, La., a town with a population of about 3,400, a short drive from Natchez. Nelson currently serves as editor. According to the weekly's website, he has been employed at the publication "off and on" since 1975.

"My boss walked by one Wednesday morning," Stanley remembered. "We print on Wednesday. She said, 'I was watching TV last night and saw this list. There is a man from Ferriday on there.'"

Local businessman Frank Morris died four days after his shoe shop was set on fire while he was sleeping in a back room.

The list Nelson's boss referred to was compiled by the FBI and included unsolved murders from the civil rights era.

Nelson found the list online, placed a call to the Southern Law Poverty Center and asked if they had anything on Morris.

"The lady there sent me 150 heavily redacted pages," he remembered. "I wrote my story within two or three hours, and I honestly thought, 'I'll do this and maybe write one more, and that will be it.'"

He did write a follow-up.

Then he got a phone call from Morris' granddaughter, who was 12 at the time of her grandfather's death.



"She said, 'I called to thank you,'" Nelson explained. "'I've learned more in one or two articles than I have in the last 40-something years about what happened to my grandfather.'"

Nelson said his heart cracked.

He remembered seeing a horrific accident on the way home from a football game when he was in high school. A family was trapped in a burning Volkswagen.

"It's not something I think about all the time, but when that came up, I just couldn't get it out of my head – how you could purposely set someone on fire," he said with a soft Southern accent. "It was just a real mystery as to who did it. As I continued to work, I found out about other cases."

According to Nelson's investigation, "Mr. Morris ... asked the wrong guy to pay for a shoe repair."

The tragedy stemmed from a confrontation Morris had with Concordia Sheriff Deputy Frank DeLaughter. Morris expected payment for repairs done for the deputy.

While Nelson says he doesn't believe the intention was to kill Frank Morris, he believes the intention was to "put him out of business."

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DeLaughter wanted to make an example out of Morris “to other blacks that you don’t talk to a white deputy that way,” Nelson said.

The reason this theory is “so compelling is before in the 1960s investigation, there were six or seven suspects, but they were all pretty well dead ended,” explained Nelson, who has been working as a reporter since he graduated from Louisiana Tech.

“Frank DeLaughter was just an evil, brutal man,” Nelson said. “He beat people and killed people supposedly in the line of duty.”

Another name came up while Nelson was working the case.

Leonard Spencer, a truck driver from Rayville, was implicated by several people, including an ex-wife, son and ex-brother-in-law. Spencer admitted attending Klu Klux Klan meetings in the 1960s, but denied any knowledge of Frank Morris.

“The thing about the new information from family members was that you have an actual person who says the perpetrators admit that they did it,” Nelson mused.

While doing research for the stories, Nelson discovered that Morris did not have a great relationship with the Ferriday Police Department. They tried to make him look bad.

“They were always basically derogatory to him,” Nelson offered. “They called him a drunk and [said] he was peddling dope. He was not. They were also involved in heavily promoting this idea that he was allowing black/white sexual liaisons in the back of his shop. I think that was totally false – not one word of truth to that.”

One day, an elderly white woman who would not identify herself called Nelson and said:

□ I just want to tell you something. I’ve been reading these stories in the newspaper about Mr. Morris. All this stuff about him having white women up there. That’s just talk. It’s not true. It’s totally false.

□□ □ I had a houseful of kids. My kids would go up with me to that shoe shop. Frank would always walk out to a white woman’s car.

Morris didn’t want the woman walking into the shop for obvious reasons.

She went on to say Morris was always polite and that he brought her children candy.

Then she said, “I wasn’t a bad looking woman back then. He never did anything to me.”

Since he began writing about Morris and other cold cases, Nelson has received calls from all over the country, including the wife of a Klansman, the widow of a Klansman, the widow of a black man who was harassed and “wonderful calls from elderly black women who lived through the era.”

A man who lived in New Orleans read Nelson’s stories and offered to share a photo of Frank Morris standing in front of the shop that burned.

“Isn’t that a wonderful photo?” he asked. “It really captures a time.”

Nelson has also conducted interviews in cemeteries, cornfields and nursing homes.

“You meet people where they are most comfortable,” he advised.

During the course of his investigation, Nelson also had the opportunity to interview Billy Bob Williams, a retired FBI agent who was assigned to Natchez when he was in his late 20s.

“He had been here for a while,” Nelson explained. “He was in the office when Joseph Edwards’ mother walks in and says, ‘The Klan got my boy. I don’t know where he is at, but he’s missing.’”

According to Nelson, Williams later hears that Joseph Edwards had been “kidnapped and taken to a remote farm house and had been tortured and then had been skinned alive – then killed.”

Williams said the story bothered him so badly that he consulted a doctor who told him it could

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be done.

“The doctor said, ‘It would be a bloody mess, and you would have to have a lot of patience,’” Nelson recalled.

Edwards’ body was never recovered.

“I wrote that story and Williams’ remembrance of it,” Nelson said. “As a result, the FBI reopened that case because it was not on the original list in 2007.”

The leading suspect in the Edwards case died in 2009.

The FBI also reopened the Morris murder. A grand jury was convened, but no indictment was handed down.

“They closed the Morris case earlier this year,” Nelson said. “I wasn’t surprised. There is very little physical evidence remaining in these cases. The FBI and Justice Department do not want to take a case that is not based on witness testimony and they want forensics to back it up. They keep saying, ‘People watch all these forensic shows now and you can’t convict.’”

Spencer died in 2013.

“Time is working against us,” Nelson admitted.

In the meantime, Nelson continues to write, with full support from his publisher, the Hanna family, who has owned the Sentinel since 1965.

“They never blinked. They took some heat,” Nelson said. “They are a good newspaper family.”

Nelson claims he’s not afraid of repercussions related to publishing his findings.

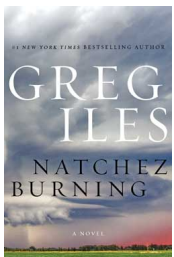
“I’ve thought about it,” he admitted.

However, a statement from retired FBI agent John Pfeifer changed his point of view. Pfeifer served in the area during a “really terrible time,” Nelson explained. The agent carried his gun in a briefcase because he didn’t want people to fear the gun.

Pfeifer said, “When you feel like you’re doing something that’s right, it gives you a confidence. I can’t describe it any other way.”

As for his part, Nelson says, “It needed to be done. Somebody had to do it. It was my responsibility. I always thought that was a good way to look at it.”

More than 200 stories later, Nelson’s still doing his job.



His work was the foundation for Greg Iles’ best selling novel, “Natchez Burning.”

Iles dedicated the book to Nelson and even created the character of journalist Henry Sexton based on Nelson.

“Some don’t like the ending, but I say, ‘What do you mean? I’m a hero,’” he said with a soft chuckle.

Although he never uses the word, Nelson admits that all the hoopla over “Natchez Burning” is “cool.’ That’s what I think.”

The *Concordia Sentinel* has won the Payne Award for ethics in journalism, the Courage and Justice Award and the Tom and Pat Gish Award for courage, integrity and ethics in rural journalism.

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Nelson has been invited to speak on panels and has been the subject of numerous articles. He's also been nominated for a Pulitzer Prize.

In addition to this duties at the newspaper, Nelson is currently at work on a book about the cold cases.

The manuscript is due to Louisiana State Univeristy press by the end of the year.

The work he's done for the past seven years has impacted his personal life.

"I've been married three times," he confessed. "I'm presently divorced. My kids are grown. I haven't been dating in a while because I've been dating this story. It's not conducive to anything other than that."

But, Nelson has no regrets.

"I'm happy to do anything for Frank Morris and all these folks," he said at the end of the interview. "One thing I want people to do is to care about them. The next step is [for their stories] to be taught in the classroom. This is our history."

Editor's note: "Natchez Burning" is a violent book, containing graphic scenes of incomprehensible brutality and highly-charged adult language and situations.

It is the first of Iles' planned trilogy and it is the most important book I've read this year.

The author's publicist has promised to make him available when the paperback edition is published in the fall of 2015. Watch for our complete review and interview in your *News-Telegram*

To watch a video on the cold case project, click [here](#) .

To hear National Public Radio's piece featuring "Natchez Burning," copy the link below and paste into your web browser:

www.npr.org/2014/07/21/330408719/writer-plumbs-nature-of-evil-in-hometowns-violent-civil-rights-past

To watch an interview with Leonard Spencer, click [here](#) .