

MiamiHerald.com

Posted on Wed, Jul. 23, 2008

You think slavery ended in 1865?

By LEONARD PITTS JR.

This is how John Davis became a slave:

He was walking one evening from the train depot in Goodwater, Ala., when a white man appeared in the road. "Nigger," he demanded, "have you got any money?"

The white man, Robert Franklin, was a constable. He claimed Davis owed him. This was news to Davis.

"I don't owe you anything," he said.

But what Davis said did not matter. He was arrested that night and summarily convicted. A wealthy landowner, John Pace, paid the alleged \$40 debt and a \$35 fine in exchange for Davis' mark -- Davis was illiterate -- on a contract binding him to work 10 months at any task Pace demanded. For all intents and purposes, the one man now owned the other. For all intents and purposes, John Davis was John Pace's slave.

This was September 1901 -- 36 years after the end of the Civil War.

It would be appalling if it happened once. Douglas Blackmon says it happened hundreds of thousands of times in Alabama alone. Blackmon, Atlanta bureau chief for The Wall Street Journal, is the author of a compelling new book, *Slavery By Another Name*. Yours truly flatters himself that he is well versed in African-American history, but this book introduced me to a chapter of that history I did not know.

I didn't know, for example, about the so-called "convict leasing system" of the South, wherein poor black men were routinely snatched up and tried on false, petty or nonexistent charges by compliant courts, assessed some fine they could not afford and then "sold" for the cost of that fine to some mine, turpentine farm or plantation, the money going back to the judges and sheriffs.

Swamps and warehouses

- I did not know that when men served their time, they were sometimes subject to prompt re-arrest on even flimsier charges -- such as that of "stealing" the jail clothes they walked out in.
- I did not know the system was so elaborate that businesses could put in orders with local sheriffs to arrest the number of men they needed.
- I did not know about black men chained up in swamps and workhouses, held under armed guard, fed gruel, worked beyond human endurance, beaten beyond human decency, subjected to cruelties that made antebellum slavery seem merciful by comparison. After all, in the antebellum years a slave represented an investment of up to \$2,000. But in this new economy, slave labor was cheap, which

made slave life cheaper still.

Blackmon says that white men were openly buying and selling black men under this system until after World War II.

And is it too fanciful to draw a straight line from that perversion of the justice system to six black kids charged with attempted murder in Jena, La., for jumping on a white boy; or to dozens of black men and women lied into jail by a fake cop in Tulia, Texas; or to Marcus Dixon sentenced to 15 years for having sex with a white girl near Atlanta; or to studies documenting beyond refutation or debate the systemic racism of the nation's cops and courts?

Small wonder, says Blackmon, ``there is a fundamental culture of skepticism, cynicism, fear of the judicial system among African Americans."

As Blackmon sees it, the revelations here reset the clock on the old argument over how much progress African Americans have or have not made since slavery "ended" in 1865. ``It changes all the math of racial progress and racial achievement. Huge numbers of people who are alive today were born into a world where de facto slavery was still a part of American life."

Which is an astonishing notion but then, *Slavery By Another Name* is an astonishing book. It will challenge and change your understanding of what we were as Americans -- and of what we are.

I cannot recommend it to you highly enough.

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