

Revisionists love to re-tell the South's story

Written by Chris Hedges, TruthDig.com

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On a windy afternoon a few days ago I went to a depressed section of North Memphis to visit an old clapboard house that was once owned by a German immigrant named Jacob Burkle. Oral history—and oral history is all anyone has in this case since no written documents survive—holds that Burkle used his house as a stop on the underground railroad for escaped slaves in the decade before the Civil War. The house is now a small museum called Slave Haven. It has artifacts such as leg irons, iron collars and broadsheets advertising the sale of men, women and children. In the gray floor of the porch there is a trapdoor that leads to a long crawl space and a jagged hole in a brick cellar wall where fugitives could have pushed themselves down into the basement. Escaped slaves were purportedly guided by Burkle at night down a tunnel or trench toward the nearby Mississippi River and turned over to sympathetic river traders who took them north to Cairo, Ill., and on to freedom in Canada.

Burkle and his descendants had good reason to avoid written records and to keep their activities secret. Memphis, on the eve of the Civil War, was one of the biggest slave markets in the South. After the war the city was an epicenter for Ku Klux Klan terror that included lynching, the nighttime burning of black churches and schools and the killing of black leaders and their white supporters, atrocities that continued into the 20th century. Martin Luther King Jr. was assassinated in Memphis in 1968. If word had gotten out that Burkle used his home to help slaves escape, the structure would almost certainly have been burned and Burkle or his descendants, at the very least, driven out of the city. The story of Burkle's aid to slaves fleeing bondage became public knowledge only a couple of decades ago.

The modest public profile of the Burkle house stands in stunning contrast with the monument in the center of Memphis to native son Nathan Bedford Forrest. Forrest, who is buried in Forrest

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Park under a statue of himself in his Confederate general's uniform and mounted on a horse, is one of the most odious figures in American history. A moody, barely literate, violent man—he was not averse to shooting his own troops if he deemed them to be cowards—he became a millionaire before the war as a slave trader. As a Confederate general he was noted for moronic aphorisms such as "War means fighting and fighting means killing." He was, even by the accounts of those who served under him, a butcher. He led a massacre at Fort Pillow in Henning, Tenn., of some 300 black Union troops—who had surrendered and put down their weapons—as well as women and children who had sheltered in the fort. Forrest was, after the war, the first grand wizard of the Ku Klux Klan. He used his skills as a former cavalry commander to lead armed night raids to terrorize blacks.

Forrest, like many other white racists of the antebellum South, is enjoying a disquieting renaissance. The Sons of Confederate Veterans and the West Tennessee Historical Commission last summer put up a 1,000-pound granite marker at the entrance to the park that read "Forrest Park." The city, saying the groups had not obtained a permit, removed it with a crane. A dispute over the park name, now raging in the Memphis City Council, exposes the deep divide in Memphis and throughout much of the South between those who laud the Confederacy and those who detest it, a split that runs like a wide fault down racial lines.

A call last week by Memphis City Councilwoman Janis Fullilove, who is African-American, to strip Forrest's name from the park and rename it after the crusading black journalist Ida B. Wells set off such an acrimonious debate between her and some white council members that Fullilove left a meeting in tears.

Wells was one of the nation's most courageous and important journalists. She moved to Memphis as a young woman to live with her aunt. Her investigations revealed that lynching was fundamentally a mechanism to rid white businessmen of black competitors. When Thomas Moss of Memphis, a black man who ran the People's Grocery Co., was murdered with his partners by a mob of whites and his store was looted and destroyed, Wells was incensed. "This is what opened my eyes to what lynching really was," she wrote. She noted "that the Southerner had never gotten over this resentment that the Negro was no longer his plaything, his servant, and his source of income" and was using charges of rape against black business owners to mask this resentment. The lynching of Moss, she wrote, was "[a]n excuse to get rid of Negroes who were acquiring wealth and property and thus keep the race terrorized and 'keep the nigger down.' "

Her newspaper, *Free Speech*, which railed against white mob violence, the inadequate black schools, segregation, discrimination and a corrupt legal system that denied justice to blacks,

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was destroyed by whites. Wells was forced to flee the city, becoming, as she wrote, "an exile from home for hinting at the truth."

The split between those in Memphis who hold up authentic heroes—those who fought to protect, defend and preserve life, such as Wells and Burkle—and those who memorialize slave traders and bigots such as Forrest points up a disturbing rise of a neo-Confederate ideology in the South. Honoring figures like Forrest in Memphis while ignoring Wells would be like erecting a statue to the Nazi death camp commander Amon Goeth in the Czech Republic town of Svitavy, the birthplace of Oskar Schindler, who rescued 1,200 Jews.

The rewriting of history in the South is a retreat by beleaguered whites into a mythical self-glorification. I witnessed a similar retreat during the war in Yugoslavia in the 1990s. As Yugoslavia's economy deteriorated, ethnic groups built fantasies of a glorious past that became a substitute for history. They sought to remove, through exclusion and finally violence, competing ethnicities to restore this mythological past. The embrace by nationalist groups of a nonreality-based belief system made communication with other ethnic groups impossible. They no longer spoke the same cultural language. There was no common historical narrative built around verifiable truth. A similar disconnect was illustrated last week in Memphis when the chairman of the city's parks committee, William Boyd, informed the council that Forrest "promoted progress for black people in this country after the war." Boyd argued that the KKK was "more of a social club" at its inception and didn't begin carrying out "bad and horrific things" until it reconstituted itself with the rise of the modern civil rights movement.

"Lord, have mercy," Fullilove muttered as she listened.

But Forrest is only one of numerous flashpoints. Fliers reading "Loyal White Knights of the Ku Klux Klan Wants You to Join" appeared in the mailboxes of white families in Memphis in early January. The Ku Klux Klan also distributed pamphlets a few days ago in an Atlanta suburb. The Tennessee Legislature last year officially declared July 13 as Nathan Bedford Forrest Day to honor his birthday. There are 32 historical markers honoring Forrest in Tennessee alone and several in other Southern states. Montgomery, Ala., which I visited last fall, has a gigantic Confederate flag on the outskirts of the city, planted there by the Sons of Confederate Veterans. Confederate monuments dot Montgomery's city center. There are three Confederate state holidays in Alabama, including Martin Luther King/Robert E. Lee Day. Alabama, Florida, Georgia and Mississippi also honor Lee's birthday. Jefferson Davis' birthday is a state holiday in Alabama and Florida. And re-enactments of Confederate victories in the Civil War crowd Southern calendars.

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The steady rise of ethnic nationalism over the past decade, the replacing of history with mendacious and sanitized versions of lost glory, is part of the moral decay that infects a dying culture. It is a frightening attempt, by those who are desperate and trapped, to escape through invented history their despair, impoverishment and hopelessness. It breeds intolerance and eventually violence. Violence becomes in this perverted belief system a cleansing agent, a way to restore a lost world. There are ample historical records that disprove the myths espoused by the neo-Confederates, who insist the Civil War was not about slavery but states' rights and the protection of traditional Christianity. But these records are useless in puncturing their self-delusion, just as documentary evidence does nothing to blunt the self-delusion of Holocaust deniers. Those who retreat into fantasy cannot be engaged in rational discussion, for fantasy is all that is left of their tattered self-esteem. When their myths are attacked as untrue it triggers not a discussion of facts and evidence but a ferocious emotional backlash. The challenge of the myth threatens what is left of hope. And as the economy unravels, as the future looks bleaker and bleaker, this terrifying myth gains potency.

Achilles V. Clark, a soldier with the 20th Tennessee Cavalry under Forrest during the 1864 massacre at Fort Pillow, wrote to his sister after the attack: "The slaughter was awful. Words cannot describe the scene. The poor deluded negroes would run up to our men, fall upon their knees, and with uplifted hands scream for mercy but they were ordered to their feet and then shot down. ... I, with several others, tried to stop the butchery, and at one time had partially succeeded, but General Forrest ordered them shot down like dogs and the carnage continued. Finally our men became sick of blood and the firing ceased."