

Rotary
Club of
Charlotte



THIS WEEK'S PROGRAM

May 3, 2022

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Michael Almond – Former law partner turned novelist

By Rick Handford

Luther Moore introduced Michael Almond, “a character”, who for a time was a back-door neighbor of his. Michael graduated from UNC-Chapel Hill undergrad and law schools, where he was a Morehead Scholar and Fellow, and was a Fulbright scholar in political science at the University of Manheim, Germany. He was a partner with Parker Poe from 1984 until 1999, during which time he led the Firm’s international practice. From 1999 to 2005, he served as the president and chief executive officer of the Charlotte Regional Partnership.

Now living with his wife, Helen Ruth, in the blue ridge mountains, Almond has published a novel, “The Tannery,” in which he unwinds a story of a black youth unjustly accused of murder in the death of a beautiful young white woman. It’s set in Wilkes County, NC, in the year 1900.

Michael started his talk by noting that he had spoken to Charlotte Rotary many times before, with his last appearance being in 2002. He was told this by **David Erdman**, who he met in 1965 (57 years ago!). David also reminded him that at that last appearance, he had said, “This Rotary Club is the premier venue in the entire Charlotte Region if you have something important to say to the Charlotte community.” He said he was honored to be here and looked forward to coming back.

A voracious reader, he began to think that somewhere in himself there might (just maybe) be a book of his own. He was told by some writers that there were two things to learn about the process: “Write what you know”

and “Just tell me a story.” As one who grew up in a small town in rural North Carolina and who had experienced the racial unrest of the 1960s, he determined that a book set in a small rural town in North Carolina during the turbulent era circa 1900 might fit inside those rules, and he began thinking about the storyline of this book. That was 14 years ago, while he was still working. Being a linear-thinking lawyer, he began researching the history of the time and working on an outline.

Two years ago, he got to the point where he pulled his latest outline from the printer and excitedly ran down the stairs and handed it to Helen Ruth, exclaiming “Here it is!” She was less than impressed, and told him that she, as well as everybody they knew, was worn out from hearing about his research, his outline, and the book he was going to write. He needed to sit down and write the darn book or decide not to and shut up about it. So, he went back upstairs and started writing, and five months later he had finished the book.

The book is historical fiction, a murder mystery, and a legal thriller, set in Wilkes County, NC during the election year of 1900, a very carefully chosen time. And the story is also about justice, and if there could be any for a mixed-race young man accused of murdering a white woman, from an all-male, all-white jury in that time and place.

To understand the story, one needs to be familiar with the historical context in which the story takes place. The Civil War was a society-changing event for North Carolina, the last state to join the Confederacy, and the state with the highest death toll—over 25% of all Confederate casualties were North Carolinians. When the war ended, NC was occupied by federal troops and the economy was in shambles. The total population at that time was about 100 million, and over 1/3 of those were poor, uneducated blacks. Uneducated, because before the war ended, it was a crime, in North Carolina and across the south, to teach a slave to read. But despite their situation, they were hopeful.

The reconstruction amendments to the US Constitution (13th ended slavery, 14th granted full civil and citizenship rights to blacks, and the 15th guaranteed (men) the right to vote) had been passed and black men signed up to vote by the tens of thousands, and 90% turned out and voted on election day. Across the south, some 2,000 blacks were elected to state and local offices, and about 100 were either elected or appointed to federal offices. And all of their votes were for Republicans--the party of abolition, of Lincoln, and of emancipation. Combined with the white Republicans, this ‘Fusion Party’ outnumbered and was able to outvote the Democrats. George Henry White, a black North Carolinian, was elected to the US House in 1896, and served from 1897 to 1901. He was the only black ever to serve in Congress until Barbara Jordan was elected to the House from the state of Texas in 1972.

After 1877, the federal troops left the south, and the Democrat Party, which was and had been since its founding the pro-slavery party, began to reassert itself. They proudly claimed the white supremacist label and the “lost cause” of the Confederacy. In 1896, North Carolina elected a Republican Governor, and four prominent leaders of the NC Democrat Party decided to create a

new strategy to regain power. They were Furnifold Simmons (Democrat Party Chair), Charles B. Aycock, Josephus Daniels, and Cameron Morrison. They conceived and successfully executed a campaign of white supremacy (inciting fear of blacks in positions of authority among whites) and the 'redemption' of North Carolina from "Negro Domination". Josephus Daniels, as the leading newspaper owner in the state, was in a unique position to promulgate the strategy during the 1898 and future elections. (For relevant political cartoons, see <https://exhibits.lib.unc.edu/exhibits/show/1898>).

In addition to the publicity campaign, they also used the Red Shirts, successors to the Ku Klux Klan, who roamed through the state, intimidating and sometimes inflicting violence against blacks. In November of 1898, some two thousand Red Shirts, with arms including two rapid-fire machine guns, invaded the city of Wilmington and overthrew the newly and duly elected bi-racial government. This "Wilmington Massacre" is still the only violent overthrow of an elected government in the United States. Somewhere between 60 and 300 innocent blacks were executed, and 2,000 blacks and white Republicans were permanently driven from the city. The event was widely reported in newspapers across the state and the country, but in spite of this, not a single person was ever arrested, charged, or convicted of any of these crimes, and the entire event was effectively covered up for many years.

In 1899, the NC Suffrage Amendment was introduced, requiring that voters pass a literacy test and pay a poll tax. While the amendment was being drafted it was pointed out that a lot of white people would also not be able to pass a literacy test, causing the NC Legislature to create the first *grandfather clause*, which provided that anyone who was a linear descendent of someone eligible to vote prior to 1867, and who registered prior to 1908, would be exempted from the literacy test. This was convenient, because blacks were not eligible to vote before 1867. These Jim Crow provisions were legal under the Constitution, as they did not specifically mention race. They were incredibly effective and reduced the numbers of black registered voters in NC from 125,000 in 1896 to 6,000 in 1902 and less than 1,300 in 1904. This allowed the Democrat Party to regain total power over the legislature and the Governor's office for the next 100 years.

With the historical setting firmly in place, the remainder of the story is left to be told by itself. Michael closed his talk with the three quotes that begin the book:

"The past is never dead. It's not even past." **William Faulkner**

"What has been will be again, what has been done will be done again; there is nothing new under the sun." **Ecclesiastes 1:9**

"History, despite its wrenching pain, cannot be unlived, but if faced with courage, need not be lived again." **Maya Angelou**

*A recording of the program is available here: <https://vimeo.com/706293018>
The presentation begins at 17:15 minutes.