

# Mabel Norris Reese: Pressing forward in the face of fear

By GARY MCKECHNIE

The year was 1971 and Mabel Norris Reese, former owner and editor of the weekly *Mount Dora Topic* and now a general assignment reporter for the *Daytona Beach News-Journal*, entered a courtroom with attorney Richard Graham. The Daytona lawyer had offered his services pro bono after learning Jesse Daniels, a mentally disabled white teenager, had been framed for rape by Lake County Sheriff Willis McCall. While both Graham and Reese were determined to help free Daniels who, after being committed without trial, had already spent 14 years in solitary confinement in the Florida State Hospital for the Insane at Chattahoochee, Graham confided to Reese that the prospect of facing down the notoriously violent sheriff scared him to death.

Reese looked Graham straight in the eye.

"Then stand behind me," she said.

## A profile in courage

Maya Angelou once said that of all the virtues, courage is the most crucial. With it, you can accomplish almost anything. Without it, you'll achieve next to nothing.

A quarter-century after her passing, Mabel Norris Reese (later Mabel Norris Chesley) remains one of Florida's leading profiles in courage: a Central Florida housewife and mother who also happened to be a journalist who crusaded for justice. A woman who, on one page, would report on Mount Dora's social affairs and garden club news while on another would expose Lake County's corrupt sheriff's department for planting evidence and framing suspects. One day she would receive a Pulitzer Prize nomination for defending

a family whose children were removed from school for the crime of being Black, and the next day receive death threats for her audacity in speaking truth to power.

Nevertheless, she persisted.

Incredibly, the life of Mabel Norris Reese may have been

forgotten had it not been for *Devil in the Grove*, Gilbert King's Pulitzer Prize-winning book that recounted a tragedy that occurred in Central Florida's Lake County. Accused of raping a white woman in 1949, black suspects who became known as "The Groveland Four" were victims of the time - and victims of Sheriff McCall. One, Ernest Green, was killed by the sheriff's posse before he could stand trial. To coerce confessions, the others - Walter Irvin, Samuel Shepherd, and Charles Greenlee - were brutally beaten by McCall and his deputies in the basement of the Lake County courthouse.

As owner and editor of the *Mount Dora Topic*, Reese initially sided with the larger-than-life sheriff and, in editorials, called for the swift execution of the accused. But her

moment of epiphany came in 1951 when, on a dark country road in rural Lake County, McCall murdered Samuel Shepherd and wounded Walter Irvin after claiming the two handcuffed prisoners had tried to escape. When Reese investigated the killing, she saw gaping holes in the sheriff's alibi. When she

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realized her stories in support of the sheriff had been solely based on lies he told to conceal his crimes, she admitted to her readers that she had been wrong. In light of mounting evidence Reese began to write editorials and articles that told her readers that her trust in Sheriff McCall had been misplaced. Even more courageous was her admission that she had been mistaken in her positions on race, civil rights, and justice. To atone for her past, Reese would make it her mission to seek justice for the Groveland Four as well as other victims of the sheriff and his accomplices.

Her columns switched from trivial small town news to issues of substance as subscribers to the *Mount Dora Topic* began seeing courage in 12-point type. She revealed that the sheriff and his deputies manufactured evidence, intimidated suspects, and turned the county courthouse basement into a makeshift torture chamber where confessions were meted out with clubs, fists, and broken bottles. It was a bold move that earned her the respect of law-abiding citizens – and the wrath of Willis McCall and his colleagues in the Ku Klux Klan.

Despite facing threats of physical and economic retaliation, Reese followed this new path; her decision embodying the observation that “courage isn’t the absence of fear... It is pressing forward in the *face of fear*.” In public and in private as she was vilified and demeaned by McCall and his cronies, Mabel Norris Reese would not back down. Instead, she continued to advance her quest for the release or commutation of sentences for Walter Irvin and Charles Greenlee, the surviving members of the Groveland Four.

Simultaneously, she was covering the case of the Platt Family, whose five Croatan Indian children were forced out of

Mount Dora's whites-only public schools when the school board and Willis McCall suspected they were "negroes." The blatant example of racism would have an international impact. As Reese came to the family's defense in the *Mount Dora Topic*, the national news media came to Reese. Her stories were picked up by major outlets and became the foundation for network news features.

Her stories of the Platts children and their fight to remain in school earned her a Pulitzer Prize nomination and even reached the desk of Soviet Premier Nikita Khrushchev who countered arguments of his country's human rights abuses with observations on Lake County's treatment of African-American school-children.

When Reese's stories of the Platts struck a nerve, McCall and the Klan struck back. Two bombs were exploded at her home in a quiet residential neighborhood, dead fish were dumped in her yard, a Klan cross painted at the sidewalk of her newspaper office, and her dog killed by being fed a chunk of cyanide-laced meat. Then, in February 1954 when the United States Supreme Court issued a favorable ruling

on a civil rights issue, the KKK took out their anger on Reese, burning a cross in her yard as a warning to kill any stories sympathetic to African-Americans. Reese would not back down. Hours after the flames died out, she began typing her weekly column...

“I do not intend to withdraw my claim that it is cowardly and it is despicable to show defiance to the Supreme Court of the United States by burning a cross.

“Though a cross burst into flames in the front of my home

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*Samuel Shepherd, Charles Greenlee, and Walter Irvin – the surviving members of the Groveland Four – being held at the Lake County jail.*



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Monday night, I shall not take it as a signal that I should lapse into silence – that I must now bow in abject fear to the Ku Klux Klan and write no more editorials such as the one condemning the recent cross-burnings in East Town or those deploring organized efforts against the Supreme Court segregation decision.

“I will continue to speak as one who intends to inject a small voice of reason and sanity into a situation which could divide our nation in this, her most trying hour.”

## A conscientious protector

History would present yet another challenge for Reese in 1957 when McCall, working in concert with local judges and attorneys, framed Jesse Daniels, a mentally disabled 19-year-old for rape. Committed without trial, Daniels would spend years in solitary confinement at the state hospital for the insane. This tragic case of judicial malpractice is told in painful detail in Gilbert King's 2018 novel *Beneath a Ruthless Sun*.

Once again, from her desk at the *Mount Dora Topic* Reese launched what would become a 14-year mission to free Jesse and, once again, she would face off against Willis McCall who now had the county government, its commissioners, and its judicial system under his control. In a last-ditch effort to destroy his nemesis, McCall launched a rival newspaper to challenge the *Mount Dora Topic* and it was this economic reality, coupled with the psychological battles she faced, that prompted Reese to relocate to the coast where she became a reporter for the *Daytona Beach News-Journal*. Among her first assignments was covering the civil rights protests in St. Augustine where segregationists launched violent and often-bloody battles to keep African-Americans removed from restaurants, stores, schools, theatres, and even the Atlantic Ocean. Her past experience covering similar issues in Mount Dora found her becoming a trusted confi-

dante of Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr., who was in the city to guide the St. Augustine protests. He quickly came to respect the courage, honesty, and accuracy Reese brought to her reporting.

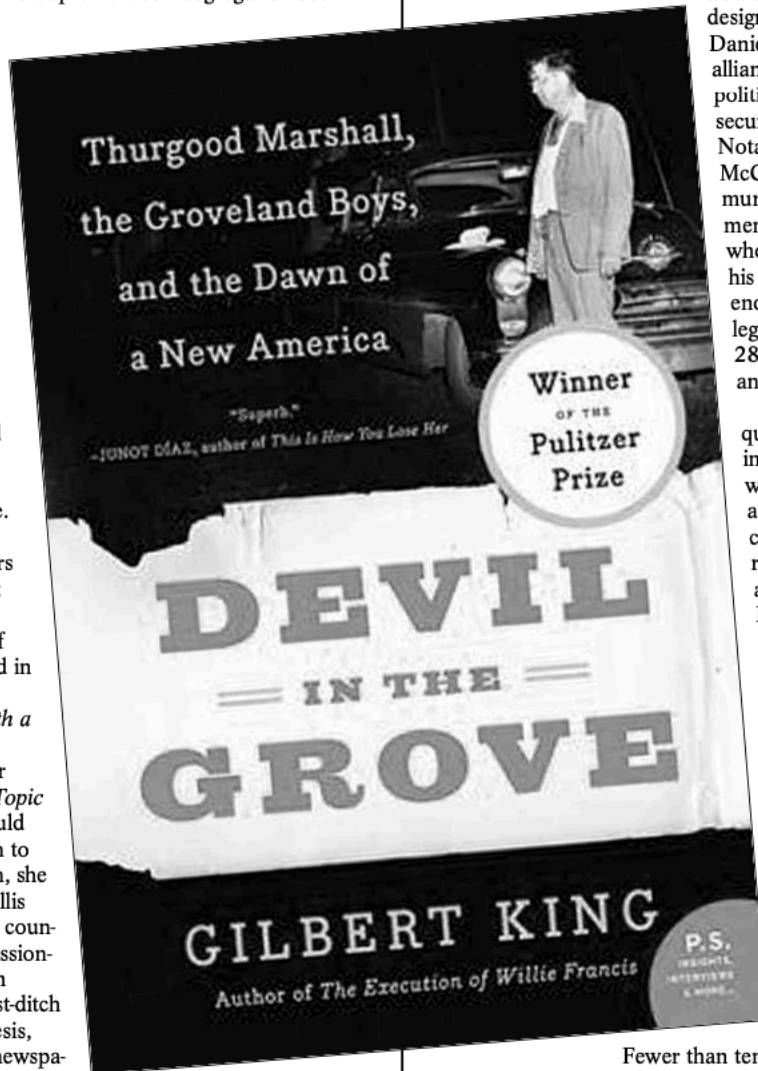
It was from her desk at the *News-Journal* where Reese would continue to write articles designed to keep the story of Jesse Daniels alive, and she would form alliances with Daniels' mother, politicians, and attorneys to help secure his release in 1971. Notably, the following year McCall would stand trial for the murder of Tommy Vickers, a mentally disabled black prisoner who he had kicked to death in his jail cell. Unrepentant to the end, McCall died in 1993 – his legacy forever tarnished by his 28-year reign of racial intolerance, brutality, and murder.

Conversely, more than a quarter century after her death in 1995, Mabel Norris Reese would come to be recognized as one of America's most courageous journalists, her reputation initially broadcast across the nation via Gilbert King's landmark books. The ripples continued to expand. In 2018 she was inducted into the Lake County Women's Hall of Fame by the Lake County Board of Commissioners and was featured regularly in newspapers, magazines, radio, television, with a website ([remembermabel.com](http://remembermabel.com)) created to chronicle her life and her courage.

To this day, interest in Reese shows no signs of slowing as her life continues to inspire others.

Fewer than ten percent of statues in America are dedicated to women, yet she helped even those odds when a local non-profit association unveiled her sculpted portrait in January 2020 and a bronze figure in 2021.

Mabel Norris Reese will remain a role model for women as well an inspiration to all citizens in this generation and all that follow.



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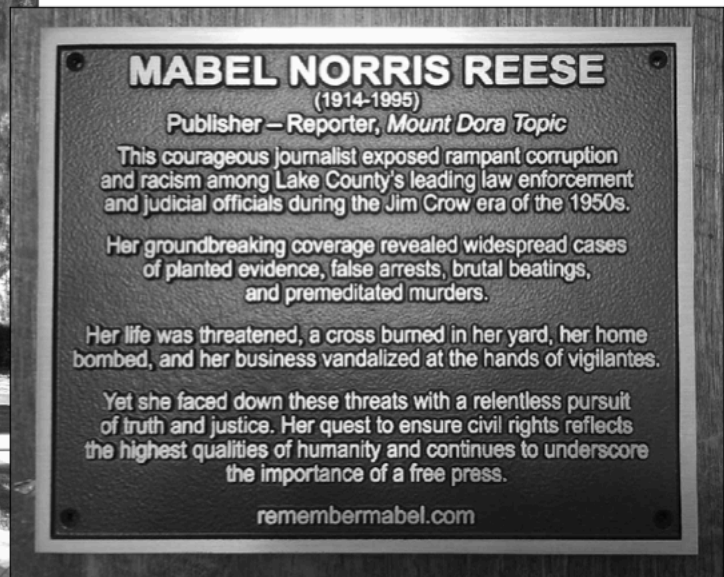
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## Epilogue

Martin Luther King, Jr. noted that while the moral arc of the universe is long, it bends towards justice. More than half a century after her articles first appeared in the *Mount Dora Topic*, in January 2019 the work of Mabel Norris Reese helped bend justice towards the Groveland Four, each of whom were pardoned by the State of Florida. Aware the pardons imply a crime was committed, determined citizens continue to press the governor to present the men with a complete exoneration.

From her desk at the *Mount Dora Topic*, Reese took a stand and spoke truth to power. She showed how one person can make a difference. She placed her life at risk while defining the maxim that courage isn't the absence of fear... It is pressing forward *in the face of fear*.

Mabel Norris Reese provided a voice for the voiceless, defended the defenseless, and proved that a free press is essen-



tial to the preservation of democracies here and around the world.

*Gary McKechnie has had multiple careers: from stand-up comedian to award-winning travel writer, from two-time National Geographic author to writing the nation's best-selling motorcycle guidebook, and from running for office to running a bed and breakfast. Email him at [gary@garymckechnie.com](mailto:gary@garymckechnie.com).*

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