Fifty-five bodies found at Florida's former reform school

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An excavation in the makeshift graveyard at the Arthur G. Dozier School for Boys in Florida last week uncovered 55 bodies in unmarked graves. These grisly findings are in addition to several other bodies found on the grounds of the campus, once housing 1,400, by an initial investigation carried out in 2009 by the Florida Department of Law Enforcement (FDLE).

The excavation efforts are led by Dr. Erin Kimmerle, an associate professor of forensic anthropology at the University of South Florida, and involve 50 other researchers from nine different agencies in attempting to locate the missing bodies that have been buried there, and to determine the cause of their deaths.

During a press conference, Dr. Kimmerle expressed her motivation for leading this mission: "This project has always been about fulfilling a fundamental human right for families who, like all of us, have a right to know what happened to their loved ones and are entitled to bury their relatives in manner which they deem proper."

The team used ground-penetrating radar to help find the grave shafts of at least 50 unmarked graves. The actual campus cemetery contains only 13 bodies, marked by pipe crosses to symbolize their death.

During the excavation, the research team found thousands of artifacts, which will help to date and more accurately record the identities of the boys buried. Some of the artifacts include belt buckles, buttons, coffin hardware, and a marble in a boy's pocket.

Also known as the Florida School for Boys and Florida State Reform School, the juvenile detention center was operated by the state of Florida from 1900 to 2011. Well before the excavation took place, the school was notorious for allegations of physical and sexual assault against the boys incarcerated there. An investigation by the US Justice Department, as well as countless other accusations, led to the institution's closure on May 26, 2011. Significantly, the official reason given by the state for closing the school was a lack of funds.

The school was intended for boys who committed crimes such as theft and murder. A change in the state's law, however, lowered the requirement to include minor infractions from "incorrigibility" to "truancy," leading to an increase in the number of boys who were sent there.

Boys who were sent to the school refer to themselves as the "White House Boys." The designation refers to the building in the school where abuse took place. Boys as young as five years of age were subjected to beatings and rape, and were hog-tied and locked in isolation, sometimes up to three weeks, in the "White House."

Students who died at the school were buried in unrecorded locations, and frequently had their deaths cited as "unknown" in the death certificates. School officials on multiple occasions did not report the deaths to the state, and failed to provide a death certificate or conduct any form of investigation. Some of the bodies were burned in the school incinerator, making it impossible to locate all the boys' bodies in order to determine the cause of death.

As a result of the extensive research conducted by Dr. Kimmerle's team, it was determined that a minimum of 98 boys died between 1914 and 1973. Many of the victims were young black males, ranging from the ages of 6 to 18. During their research, the team also discovered that 7 died while attempting to escape, and 20 died after having been there less than three months.

It would be no exaggeration, given the number of bodies discovered and the countless anecdotal stories related by those who survived the experience, to assume that many of the deaths did not result from

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natural causes, but from a range of violent and barbaric acts.

Researchers also suggest that many of the children buried may have been killed. Only further research will establish the cause of their deaths. Five sets of DNA samples have already been sent to the University of North Texas Health Science Center to identify some of the bodies.

The University of South Florida was commissioned on August 6th, 2013, to begin the excavation of remains. Florida's secretary of state, Ken Detzner, had attempted to prevent the investigation by various means, including refusing to authorize the permit for it. The team was forced to appeal to the Board of Trustees of the Internal Improvement Trust Fund, when Governor Rick Scott and his cabinet authorized Dr. Kimmerle to begin the excavation.

The first public exposure of the Dozier School took place in October 2008, when five former wards emerged publicly, telling their stories of physical and sexual abuse. The account was published in a *Tampa Bay Times* series entitled "For Their Own Good." Since 2008, more than 500 people have come forward with similar stories, all giving similar testimony.

In 2009, a follow-up investigation by the *Tampa Bay Times* caused the governor to order a state investigation into the accusations. The FDLE, which carried out the investigation, determined in its 18-page report that the deaths of the 31 boys buried at the school were due to a fire that took place in 1914 and a subsequent flu outbreak. The FDLE report only relied on the school's record to calculate the number of deaths and to map out the cemetery.

The authorities also ruled out allegations that the boys were killed by the guards and buried there. Because of lack of any first-hand information, Florida's state attorney for the district, Glenn Hess, declined to open any formal criminal investigation.

The Department of Justice (DOJ) in 2011 launched its own investigation into the school, ultimately leading to its termination. The DOJ released its report on December 2, 2011. Among its findings was the failure of Florida's oversight system to "detect and sufficiently address harmful practices at both the Arthur G. Dozier School for Boys and the Jackson Juvenile Offender Center."

The report also stated that the school failed to properly protect the youth from harm, failed to provide any rehabilitation services in violation of due process rights, displayed indifference to the risk of self-injurious or suicidal behaviors, and implemented unconstitutional means of disciplinary confinement.

Despite the findings from the DOJ and the discovery of the bodies, Florida has yet to even open a criminal investigation of those who worked at the school. Another dig is scheduled for Dr. Kimmerle's investigative team next month in the hope to find more bodies and to discover the truth behind the deaths of the boys.

The horrors being uncovered in Florida, spanning as they do a century of American history, including the likely attempt by the authorities to cover them up, targeting the most vulnerable sections of the working class, testify once more to the bankruptcy of the present social and political system.

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