

Alabama author recounts father's lynching in 'The Penalty for Success'

Josephine Bolling McCall to speak at Charlemont church

Eager to show off the ribbon she was awarded for her academic work, 5-year-old Josephine Bolling rushed to her parents' store in Lowndesboro, Ala., after school on Dec. 4, 1947.

But her father, Elmore Bolling, never saw the ribbon. He was murdered that day, and his little girl saw his body riddled with bullets.

Now a retired educator who still lives in Alabama, Josephine Bolling McCall spent a number of years trying to piece together the story of her father's life and death.

The resulting book, "The Penalty for Success," draws on interviews with people who knew the author's father; press accounts and government documents.

Bolling McCall introduces the book by explaining her research process and noting that, although we often think of lynching as related to hanging, any "premeditated act carried out by a mob of at least two people" bears that name. Bolling was shot by two men, and Bolling McCall's research indicates that others were involved in planning the murder.

Her book is partly family history. She begins with an enslaved ancestor, who was brought to Lowndes County in the early 1800s. She continues tracing the Bollings up to her father, who was born in 1908.

Her family clearly understood the conditions of the Jim Crow South. Its members quietly did their best to create a prosperous family and community within that repressive system.

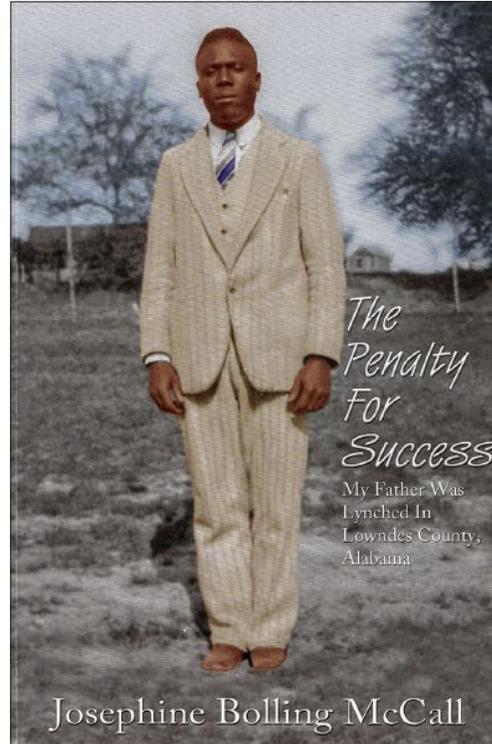
Her father is the heart of the book, and he comes across as truly remarkable — a smart, family-oriented businessman who was loved by his employees and neighbors. In contrast to many African-Americans in Alabama, he avoided being trapped in sharecropping.

Bolling was brilliant at finding ways to make money without obviously confronting the racism around him. He began by purchasing a truck, and eventually owned several vehicles that hauled all sorts of merchandise from his rural area to Montgomery, then hauled things back, too.

In addition to the trucking business, he managed a farm, ran a general store with his wife, Bertha Mae, and made money at just about any local African-American event selling food she prepared.

Bolling was popular in the black community. He gave to every conceivable local charity and provided good jobs. He allowed many individuals without money to ride on his trucks and often made loans he knew would never be repaid.

In general, he got along with powerful white businessmen by performing good work at a rea-



"The Penalty for Success"

sonable price. As the book's title suggests, however, it was his business acumen that doomed him in the end, despite his care not to confront whites. He was deemed too successful to be allowed to live.

His daughter's account of his life and death doesn't whitewash her father's flaws. It does paint a picture of a good man who didn't deserve the times and the society in which he lived.

Bolling's murderers were never indicted. But Bolling McCall's book manages to indict the system behind their deed.

Bolling McCall will speak on Saturday, Oct. 27, at 7 p.m. at the Federated Church on Route 2 in Charlemont. Her presentation will be part of the Charlemont Forum's special fall session on "Race: Facing the Truth, Owning Our Past."

This event is free and open to the public. Boswell's Books will be on hand to sell copies of "The Penalty of Success," which Bolling McCall will be happy to sign.

Tinky Weisblat is the author of "The Pudding Hollow Cookbook," "Pulling Taffy" and "Love, Laughter, and Rhubarb." Visit her website, TinkyCooks.com.



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BOOK REVIEW