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Winfred Rembert, 75, Dies; Turned Painful Memories Into Art

By Katharine Q. Seelye – April 07, 2021



Winfred Rembert in an undated photo. After seven years of incarceration and hard labor, he became an artist of some renown.
Credit...Renan Ozturk

Winfred Rembert survived a near-lynching in rural Georgia in 1967. Just 21, he had been stripped of his clothes by a mob of white men and hoisted upside down from a tree, a noose around his ankles. One man came at him with a knife and nearly castrated him, sending blood gushing down his body.

The only reason he wasn't killed was that another white man stepped in, saying there were better things that could be done with Mr. Rembert, like throwing him back in jail from which he had just escaped.

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After seven years of incarceration and hard labor for stealing a car, taking a gun from a deputy sheriff and escaping from prison, Mr. Rembert was released. He married, moved north and the couple had eight children. And in a turn of events that no one had expected, he became an artist of some renown: Carving figures into leather, a craft he had learned in prison, he recreated vivid scenes from his life, of picking cotton, being lynched and busting rocks in his prison stripes.

His art told the story of the Jim Crow South. It was exhibited in galleries and museums and helped support his family, though they lived in poverty.

Mr. Rembert died at 75 on Wednesday at his home in New Haven, Conn. His son Winfred Jr. said that the precise cause of death was not known, but that his father had struggled with diabetes, kidney disease and hypertension.



Mr. Rembert with one of his works at his home in New Haven, Conn. By carving and dyeing leather, a craft he had learned in prison, he recreated vivid scenes from his life; many included the fields of white cotton that had dominated his childhood.
Credit...Suzanne DeChillo/The New York Times

Near-lynchings were not uncommon, Bryan Stevenson, a Black lawyer who inspired the National Memorial for Peace and Justice, a museum about slavery and a memorial to lynching victims in Montgomery, Ala., said in a phone interview. What was unusual in Mr. Rembert's case was that he talked about it, providing a rare account of a lynching in the late 1960s in the American South.

"Most people don't ever feel secure enough to talk about this, although we're hearing more of these stories now," said Mr. Stevenson, who founded the Equal Justice Initiative, a legal advocacy group that works to end mass

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incarceration. “But Winfred was such a compelling storyteller, his personal narrative always included this, and he was able to talk about it in a direct way.”



Mr. Rembert's "Yellow Rows," dye on carved and tooled leather, 2014.
Credit...Collection of the Muskegon Museum of Art.

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“Chain Gang Picking Cotton #2,” dye on carved and tooled leather, 2004.
Credit...Collection of the Muskegon Museum of Art.

Mr. Rembert was 19 and working in a pool hall when he went to a demonstration in 1965 in Americus, Ga., as part of the Americus movement, a local civil rights campaign. When the protest turned violent, he was chased down an alley by two white men with shotguns.

As he was being pursued, by his account, he saw a parked car with the keys in it, jumped in and drove off. He was later caught and sent to jail.

Still in jail more than a year later, with no charges filed against him, he rebelled by stuffing the toilet in his cell with toilet paper so that it would overflow. A deputy sheriff entered the cell, the two scuffled and the deputy pulled his gun. Mr. Rembert wrested the gun away, locked the deputy in the cell and fled.

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When the authorities caught up with him, they put him in the trunk of a police car and drove to the countryside outside of his hometown, Cuthbert, in southwest Georgia. They opened the trunk and let him out.

“I saw all of these white people, and I see these ropes hanging in the tree,” he told StoryCorps, the oral history project, in 2017. “They took off all of my clothes, put the noose around my ankles, and they drew me up in this tree.”

He thought his life was over.

“The next thing I see was the deputy sheriff, who I had locked in the cell,” he said. “He took his knife, grabbed my private parts, and he stuck me with the blade. You could probably hear me for miles screaming” as the blood ran down.

“And then from out of the blue, this man said: ‘Don’t do that. We got better things we can do’” with him, using a racist slur.

Mr. Rembert spent the next seven years being rotated through different prisons, working on chain gangs. He was also paraded through Cuthbert’s Black neighborhood in shackles as an example to others not to mess with the white power structure.

That his near-lynching happened in 1967 and not 20 years earlier is probably what saved his life, Mr. Stevenson said, because “by then, the mobs didn’t have the same confidence that they could engage in these lawless killings with impunity.” Although the Justice Department was starting to investigate such crimes, he said, no one was ever held accountable for Mr. Rembert’s torture.



Mr. Rembert in a cotton field in Georgia in 2010 during the filming of the documentary “All Me: The Life and Times of Winfred Rembert.” Credit...Ducat-Segal

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In time, Mr. Rembert turned his raw experience into art. But though he was celebrated for it and earned some money from it, dwelling on his past sometimes made him physically ill.

“Now I’m 71,” he told StoryCorps 50 years after he had been hanged by his ankles, “but I still wake up screaming and reliving things that happened to me.”

He had been seeing a psychiatrist, “but I don’t think I’ll ever get over that,” he said, his voice cracking. “I think I’ll be dead and in my grave before it’s over.”

Winfred Rembert was born in Americus on Nov. 22, 1945. “My mom cheated on her husband, and I was the product of that,” he said in a documentary film, “All Me: The Life and Times of Winfred Rembert” (2011), directed by Vivian Ducat. When he was three months old, his mother gave him to her aunt, Lillian Rembert, who lived in Cuthbert and worked the cotton fields. Rows and rows of white cotton would figure prominently in Mr. Rembert’s leather artwork.

When he was on the chain gang, working on a road crew, a young woman, Patsy Gammage, caught his eye. He managed to start a correspondence with her, and they married after he was released from prison in 1974. They migrated north — first to Rochester, N.Y., then to Connecticut, where Mr. Rembert found work as a longshoreman in Bridgeport. They settled in New Haven in 1987.

He had always liked to draw. While in prison, he had learned how to work in leather using tools and dyes, and he started making small items like billfolds.

He gave a small leather picture to his friends Philip and Sharon McBlain, and they hung it on the wall of their antiquarian bookshop near New Haven. Mr. Rembert had traced the picture from a book because he didn’t think white people would buy his own work, Mr. McBlain said in an interview.

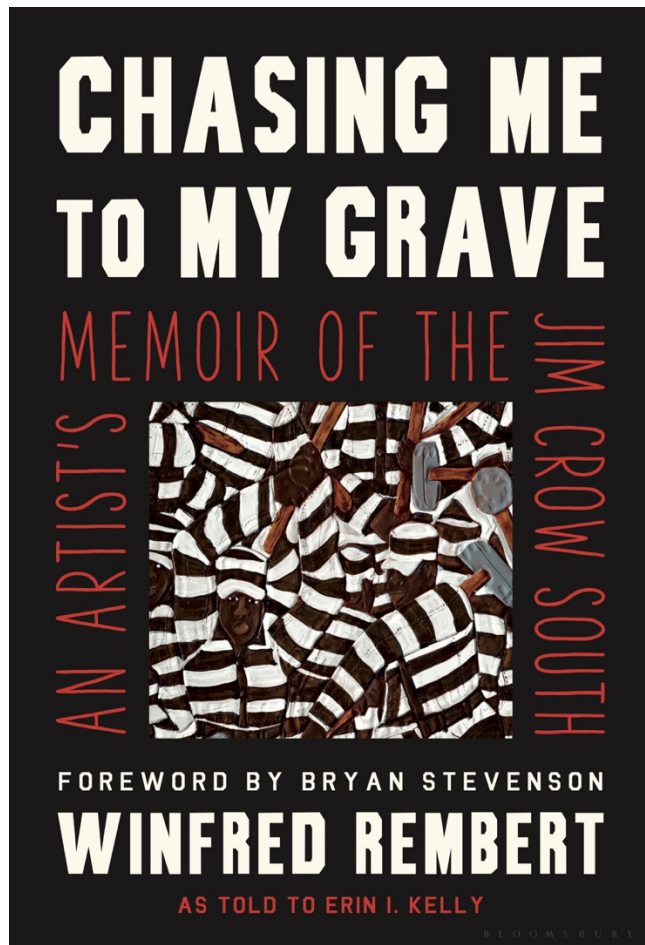
But the piece sold for \$300. Mr. McBlain gave the money to Mr. Rembert, who created a bigger picture, which sold for \$750. The McBlains got him some leather and tools, and Mr. Rembert’s wife urged him to carve pictures from his own life.

At 51, he started excavating his memories. With blades of ivory and a mallet, he reproduced — in painstaking detail — his near-lynching and gangs of prisoners in their zebra-striped uniforms with sledgehammers and shovels.

He showed lively scenes of the juke joints and pool halls of his hometown. And he showed personally painful scenes, like a classroom with all the children at their desks except for him: He was assigned to keep the potbelly stove filled with wood. He never learned to read or write until he got to prison.

He soon had a solo show, at the York Square Cinema in New Haven in 1998. Other exhibitions followed at museums and galleries — at the Yale University Art Gallery and in Harlem, Atlanta, Los Angeles and elsewhere. At the Adelson Galleries in Manhattan in 2010, some pieces sold for \$35,000 each. Perhaps the highest price he fetched was close to \$80,000, for one of his chain gang images.

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“It was important for him to go back and be recognized in Georgia as somebody who had lived a worthy life, not a nobody who had left in chains,” – Erin I. Kelly.
Credit...Bloomsbury Publishing

In addition to his wife and his son Winfred Jr., Mr. Rembert is survived by two daughters, Lillian and Nancy Rembert; four other sons, John, Mitchell and Patrick Rembert and Robby Nuñez; and 17 grandchildren. Another son, Edgar, died of a heart problem in 2015.

As his artwork brought him more attention, his hometown, Cuthbert, invited him back in 2011. The mayor declared “Winfred Rembert Day.”

He was also invited back to Georgia in 2013 for the 50th anniversary of the beginning of the Americus movement, where Mr. Rembert’s own odyssey had begun. There he met former President Jimmy Carter, who lived in nearby Plains. Mr. Rembert was thrilled.

“It was important for him to go back and be recognized in Georgia as somebody who had lived a worthy life, not a nobody who had left in chains,” said Erin I. Kelly, who collaborated with Mr. Rembert on his forthcoming memoir, “Chasing Me to My Grave: An Artist’s Memoir of the Jim Crow South.”

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“That trip,” she said, “was part of a larger story of him going home, sharing his art and the story of his life and being recognized.”