

A Lynching in Limon

Tyler: A note of caution to our listeners: this episode contains graphic discussions and descriptions of racial terror and violence.

Terri Gentry: I can't tell you how long I've known about it or when I heard about it, but I do know it just broke my heart to hear about it. And the sad part is that there there have been other incidents in Colorado that aren't necessarily registered as lynching or anything like that, but a lot of dark stories that family members and people have talked about growing up, you know, so nothing official. But it horrified me. It didn't surprise me, but it horrified me to hear how bad that was

Terri Gentry: Our lives have been in danger all over the place anyway, so... It's a sad commentary about humanity, unfortunately.

Javon Mays:

I call this poem "To Preston":

Sometimes I wonder. At what age do we know our songs?

At what time do our bodies become our melodies

our cadences

our chords?

I can still hear my grandma humming a ditty into a meal.

And I wonder what your father's saying, Preston.

To trick you and your brother's hunger into bedtime

to trick the house into cradling itself to sleep.

Yeah, sometimes I wonder.

I wonder if we all have the same fascinations of fire.

Lord knows you must not.

The act of putting a fresh log into the stove and watching the house cradle itself to sleep.

Do you ever wonder where embers go?

Have you imagined the return to the sun?

I hope you did, Preston. Because a star ain't nothing but a fire.

Tyler: From History Colorado Studios, this is *Lost Highways: Dispatches from the Shadows of The Rocky Mountains*. I'm Tyler Hill.

Noel: And I'm Noel Black. On this episode of *Lost Highways*, the lynching of Preson Porter Jr.

Tyler: Though few people think of racially motivated lynchings happening in the American West, we'll look back at the history of these unlawful executions in Colorado, and one particularly horrific incident that took place in Limon, on the eastern plains in 1900.

Noel: Black people who came to states like Colorado seeking freedom and opportunity in the decades after the Civil War often found the same racist attitudes, prejudice, and violence they'd experienced in the south also awaited them in the west.

Tyler: We'll look at the way that so-called "frontier justice"-- popularized by dime novels and Hollywood Westerns -- often became a cover for racially motivated, extrajudicial killings.

Noel: Finally, we'll look at the way that the act of community remembrance is often the most powerful form of justice for the victims of racially motivated lynchings.

Tyler: Javon Mays, the former poet laureate of Aurora, and a member of the Colorado Lynching Memorial Project, will help us tell this story with excerpts from his poem, "For Preston."

Javon Mays:

You know, I've gathered lumber for long winters

And I know you know such work

How to get into a log hurling rhythm

How to trick up the speed to stack fast.

They call a full truck bed of firewood a chord

And four full chords will get you through the winter.

But there goes those chords again.

Did you get to know your song, Preston?

Rosemary Lytle: I knew about the lynchings in Colorado. And while I had not written about this one in particular, I... Knew then and I know now that Colorado was not exempt.

Noel: This is Rosemary Lytle, President of the NAACP in Colorado, Wyoming and Montana. She's also a journalist, and worked for the *Gazette* in Colorado Springs for many years.

Rosemary Lytle: So the history was not new to me. What I felt in the exploration of it, in the immersion of it, in trying to establish a memorial to it and trying to talk to other people about it, and why it was important and must not just be talked about, but it must be taught. How there must be a monument to stand, not to the egregiousness of this world necessarily, but to the realities of it. And this is a part of the history of America and of this state.

Noel: Professor Stephen Leonard of Metropolitan State University in Denver also felt that this history needed to be told and taught. And in 2002, he wrote the book *Lynching in Colorado, 1859-1919*.

Stephen Leonard: I chose those dates because the first lynching that we have a record of, that was clearly a lynching, took place in 1859. And the last that we have a record of took place in 1919. And in that period of time, there were about 175 reported lynchings. There may be more, some undoubtedly went unreported.

Tyler: Leonard got interested in the history of lynchings in the West, in part, to shine light on the fact that lynching wasn't just a southern problem.

Stephen Leonard: I think it's important to get a definition of lynching before we begin to talk about it. Generally, scholars have taken the view that lynching occurs when a group acting on the pretext of service to justice, tradition or white supremacy, for example, kills another person without due process of law, such as a proper jury trial before an official court.

Noel: Many people also think that lynchings are just hangings.

Stephen Leonard: They've got, I guess, Western movie versions of lynchings in their minds or ideas that somehow they picked up. But it doesn't matter how a person is unjustly killed, if they're shot. Many were shot, many were hanged, and some were beaten to death. And other means were used to lynch people. So it's not the method of killing, it's just the fact of an unjust killing done by a group.

Noel: Not only did lynchings happen in the west during the time period he studied, says Leonard, but they happened in ways that we don't often think of, and in the context of "racial terror."

Stephen Leonard: By far the the large majority of Southern lynchings were lynchings of Black people. In the West, that wasn't the case to the same degree, at least in part because the Black population in the West was considerably smaller than in the South. The normal situation in the West was that it was white people lynching other white people, or in many cases, lynching Hispanic people, especially in Texas and California, but also in Colorado.

Tyler: But that changed around the turn of the century.

Stephen Leonard: By 1900, the lynchings in Colorado had become increasingly ethnically motivated.

Tyler: Just as it was in the south, lynchings in the West were often made into horrific spectacles meant to terrorize people of color.

Stephen Leonard: For example, in La Junta in 1902, a man named Washington Wallace was lynched and he was in the courthouse, being held in jail and a mob of 4000 besieged this courthouse, broke every window in the building and knocked, battered in the door with a telegraph pole in order to get him out. And then they hanged him and then shot him. And so that was very much of the spectacle that they were engaged in.

Noel: As horrifying as Washington Wallace's lynching was, it was the lynching of Preston Porter in 1900 that caught the attention of two racial justice activists who both read Leonard's book in 2018.

Tyler: Judy Ollman is a Denver-based activist who does volunteer work in Colorado prisons with the Peace Education Program.

Judy Ollman: I started wondering about lynching in Colorado. And that's when I found Stephen Leonard's book, professor Leonard, *Lynching in Colorado: 1859 to 1919*. And that's when I read about Preston Porter.

Noel: And here's Anthony Suggs, who also discovered the book around the same time.

Anthony Suggs: I was working for the Episcopal Church in Colorado as the missioner for advocacy and social justice. So in that role, one of the main focus areas was racial justice. And to do that a little bit better, I wanted to get to know the landscape of racial justice in Colorado, which led me to research if there had been any lynchings in Colorado. So I did some research and found out about Preston's story and was really horrified by it, and wanted to learn more.

Noel: When Stephen Leonard's book brought Suggs and Ollman together, Colorado was on the verge of becoming one of the first states in the country to pass a constitutional amendment that would formally abolish all slavery.

Tyler: To this day, incarcerated people can be treated as slaves under the 13th amendment to the UNITED STATES Constitution. And in 2018, Colorado passed an amendment to remove similar language from the State Constitution.

Noel: With the push to abolish slavery in Colorado in full swing, Suggs and Ollman both felt the time was right to remember Preston and tell his story.

[Music]

Noel: Terri Gentry is a community historian, volunteer docent, and sits on the Board of Directors of the Black American West Museum.

Tyler: She says Preston Porter's story begins with the end of the Mexican American War and the signing of the Treaty of Guadalupe Hidalgo in 1848. It granted the land that would become Texas, California, Arizona, New Mexico, Nevada, Utah, Kansas, and Colorado to the United States.

Terri Gentry: The United States bought all of this land for about US\$15 million. And then California became a free state when the decisions were being made about how they were going to handle territories. The territories could determine whether or not they were going to be a free state or a slave state. So, that's a lot of... There was a whole lot of stuff going on about free states and slave states and and what was going to happen in the West. And some of that fueled the Civil War.

Noel: For many enslaved Black people, the West and the new territories created by the Treaty of Guadalupe Hidalgo represented the possibility of a new beginning in America and freedom from the long, brutal history of slavery in the south.

Terri Gentry: So when you live a life enslaved and you're running from the brutality and the viciousness and the fear and horrific conditions... There's so much possibility in the unknown going out and making your own life and creating a way of living for your family and getting away from the horrible experiences you have. I could imagine myself that I'm thinking, "I've got nothing to lose. Let's go see what we can create. We don't know what we're going to face, but it can't be any worse than what we've been through. I'm sure it's going to be better." And so there were a lot of a lot of possibilities.

Tyler: It was in this context that Black migrants known as EXODUSTERS came west, often as homesteaders, willing to risk everything for the chance at a fresh start.

Noel: Some started all black settlements like Nicodemus, Kansas and, later, Dearfield, which we covered in Season 1 of *Lost Highways*.

Tyler: But just because they escaped the south and found land or work in free states after the emancipation proclamation didn't mean they'd escaped the culture of slavery in the U.S. and the many prejudices that fueled it.

Terri Gentry: We had a lot of folks in Colorado that didn't want to see us here... They sure had the same attitude and perspective on making sure that they kept us in our place.

Noel: After reconstruction fell short of the hopes some had for a more equal and equitable United States, Jim Crow along with other laws and prohibitions made sure formerly enslaved Black people were kept at the lowest rung of the social ladder in every facet of public life, more often than not leaving them free in name only.

Terri Gentry: There were so many egregious laws and policies put in place around the country. During the reconstruction era to pull us back as close to slavery without calling it that, so they could continue to use our labor for free or continue to make profits off of our backs, and continue to keep us contained, still having to have a pass to move from one place to another. When the voting was put in place, having poll taxes, having tests to take to, to take, to vote. And all of these policies and procedures to continue to keep us contained, keep us restricted and and to take away and chisel away at any little bitty rights that we might have acquired through the 13th, 14th and 15th Amendments, the Civil Rights Act of 1866.

Tyler: Gentry says that lynchings became increasingly common during this time between the late 1870s and the early 1900s.

Terri Gentry: By the time reconstruction ended, the violence, lynchings, murders, taking away land, burning down homes, causing people to run for their very lives. The destruction of these very lives was in full effect... And there are a few families that I know that had family members in one part of the South, and they had to pack up in the middle of the night and leave because somebody stood up to a white man and said "No" about something. Or asked for pay for something that they did. And they offended the white man because they asked for pay. So come home and say, " We're going to have to pack up and leave" and they pack up their stuff and leave in the middle of the night because they know if they're there the next morning, somebody is going to be murdered.

Tyler: For many Black men, the safest place to be was in no one place for very long.

Noel: Construction had begun on the Transcontinental Railroad in Council Bluffs, Iowa in 1863, shortly after the start of the Civil War. And by 1869, it reached all the way to San Francisco in a single, near-2000 mile long stretch of continuous track.

Tyler: And as train travel opened the west to miners, settlers, and tourists in the decades that followed, Black men found work and a home, of sorts, on the trains.

Terri Gentry: George Pullman started the sleeping cars back in probably around 1867 or so... And specifically hired Black men to service the sleeping cars on the train.

Noel: They were safer on board the trains, in some ways, and they had steady work. The Pullman Company was, in the late 19th Century, the second largest employer of black men in the country.

Tyler: But there was a price to pay.

Terri Gentry: He wanted them to wear the demeanor they had to wear during slavery. He wanted that ideology on the trains.

Noel: And the white passengers treated them accordingly.

Terri Gentry: There was always an expectation of the behavior that the Black men had to portray on the trains. But at the same time, they were invisible. And-not necessarily treated with dignity and respect. There was this "Boy, you better get my luggage" or boy, you know, that kind of stuff.

Tyler: On top of that, there were seldom even basic accommodations for Black workers.

Terri Gentry: When the Black men serviced the sleeping car trains, they didn't have any facilities on the train to sleep or take care of themselves. Sometimes they were having to sleep for a few hours in the dining cars. Some, depends on where you are, sometimes they had to wait till the train pulled into a station that they could get off the train and go use the colored restroom. There were so many things that they had to confront on the trains with, with what they were allowed and not allowed to do.

Noel: Long before the Supreme Court ruled that the so-called "separate but equal" Jim Crow laws were Constitutional in the *Plessy v Ferguson* case in 1896, Black people were treated as an underclass.

Terri Gentry: You had to disconnect who you are from what you did, so that it wouldn't tear your heart out of your chest.

Noel: Some of the men who worked the railroads also did other jobs like track maintenance and filling coal tenders that required less degrading performance for white people.

Terri Gentry: So the Pullman Porters and waiters were the primary, the largest number of folks on the trains. But you had all these support systems around the trains, and a lot of other jobs that were done in support of the train system, because it was the most important transportation system we had back in the day.

Tyler: Because there were so many Black men working on the trains, many of their families would make their homes in cities along the line.

Noel: Mostly they'd settle in places like Denver where there was relative safety in numbers.

Terri Gentry: We had quite a few Black families move into Colorado. The latter part of the 19th century and then a real explosion after the turn of the century... So, the Porter family that they were part of that experience, they moved from Kansas to Colorado.

Noel: Like so many other Black men at the time, Preston Porter, Sr., his eldest Arthur, and his 15 year old son Preston Porter Jr. took the train west.

Tyler: And in mid-November, 1900, they got off in Limon, Colorado to do work on a branch line for the Union Pacific.

[Music]

Javon Mays:

*They say in music, a chord is a harmony of three notes,
And I think about you signing the pages of the Gospel of Luke
Tearing them out
And handing them to your future executioners
One
Two
Three
And how they used those as invitations to your concert*

[Music]

Tyler: Over the next few minutes, social justice advocate Judy Ollman, her daughter Dara Ollman, Professor Stephen Leonard, Episcopal Missioner Anthony Suggs, and Historian Terri Gentry will tell the story of Preston Porter's lynching.

Noel: Again, this story is *extremely disturbing*.

Judy Ollman: Preston and his brother and father were in Colorado to work on the railroad. They actually lived in Kansas, so they were here temporarily working on the railroad in the Limon vicinity. And there was a a brutal rape and murder of a girl. Some accounts say she was 12. Some accounts say she was 13.

Stephen Leonard: There was a girl in the vicinity named Louise Frost who was murdered, you know, the accusation was that she was was raped. A lot of the farmers around that area were very much enraged by her death.

Judy Ollman: But right off the bat, there are newspaper accounts that say 'This must have been committed by a Black man.' And so the only people that they questioned in relation to that crime were Black and brown people.

Terri Gentry: They never did an investigation to find out who killed her. They just decided since this Black man happened to be in town working on the railroad, that that's the only answer to the fact that this little white girl was killed.

Judy Ollman: Preston, his father, his brother were picked up in Denver, I think they were in Denver to cash their check, at the Union Pacific. This is all documented in the newspaper.

Terri Gentry: So they arrested, from what I understand, they arrested the dad and his two sons and beat them and brutalized them mercilessly.

Judy Ollman: So after they were arrested, Preston was held in a sweatbox, he was tortured. He was, basically a confession was coerced from him.

Dara Ollman: They kept him in a sweat box and... Basically... They threatened that if you didn't confess to this sexual assault and murder of this child, that they would lynch or they would kill his his brother and his father.

Stephen: So, you know, you put, you dehydrate people, which they did by putting them in a sweatbox, which, you know, not giving enough water, and you do that for a long period of time, and then you threaten somebody with their brother or their father being lynched also or being charged with murder. And you... You have a horrible situation where somebody is very likely going to confess just to, just to not have other people in the family suffer.

Judy Ollman: So he confessed. And but he was asked about his confession. And when he was asked about it, he said, 'I confessed in order to save my father and my brother.' But of course, as soon as he confessed, then they didn't need to prove anything, because they had no direct evidence linking him to the crime. But once he confessed, they sort of didn't need that... And so that's when the calls for his lynching started.

Noel: Once they had his alleged confession, a mob of at least a thousand people gathered outside the jail in Denver, and Preston was quickly moved to the Arapaho County Jail in secret.

Tyler: Since the crime had been committed in Limon, Sheriff Freeman made arrangements to take him back to Hugo, the county seat, just 15 miles beyond Limon.

Noel: But many, including Colorado Governor Charles Thomas, a former confederate soldier, believed that Preston would be lynched, and didn't try to stop it.

Tyler: Newspapers like *The Denver Evening Post* all but called for Preston's lynching on their front pages after reporting details of Preston's confession that would undoubtedly have seemed like proof of his guilt.

Noel: Headlines like "Wild Mob at Limon Impatient for Blood of Porter" on the front page made the lynching seem virtually inevitable.

Tyler: And like so many other lynching victims, Porter's guilt was presumed by many even before his confession. Because he was a young black person, not even 16 years old, and the victim was a white girl.

Noel: Despite inconsistencies in his confession and irregularities with the evidence against him, news of his admitted guilt in the papers sealed his fate.

Judy Ollman: But of course he never made it to Hugo. He was taken off the train by a mob, an angry white mob at Lake Station, which is just outside of Limon.

Noel: According to the *Denver Evening Post*, twelve men boarded the train, subdued the Sheriff, and led Porter off the train with a noose around his neck.

Tyler: It's doubtful that Sherriff Freeman had any real intention of resisting the mob that awaited Preston in Limon, even if he could have. Sheriffs are typically elected officials, and he would've known that any attempt to prevent Porter's lynching in Limon might've put his career on the line, if not his life.

Judy Ollman: And then he was taken a short distance. They wanted to have him burned at the stake at the site of the crime.

Stephen Leonard: I think they wanted a spectacle, pretty obviously, or-they felt that they had to, you know, teach a lesson of some sort.

Judy Ollman: And then actually he... They waited, because they wanted, people were coming, you know, to view the lynching, cause it was it's what's known as a spectacle lynching, which is where, you know, crowds gather. And so they waited for trains to come from Colorado Springs and from Denver.

Anthony Suggs: Until the crowd reached over three hundred people.

Noel: The *Los Angeles Herald* reported the crowd of men and boys at around two hundred, but counts vary. The majority, it said, came from Limon, Hugo, and surrounding farms, and ranches.

Judy Ollman: Until, I think he waited as long as two hours before they actually, you know, started the fire.

Anthony Suggs: And it was only then that he was chained to this railroad tie and lit on fire.

Javon Mays:

Your solo on that stake

Your terror on that tie

The cadence of your chains

The choral of your kerosene

Accenting a symphony of splinters as your throat became their justice.

Do you think they heard you, Preston?

Did they register the register of your wail, your weeping?

Did they, Preston?

Did they hear your family in your lungs

As you went from kin to kindling?

Did they see your human as your skin molted?

Did they catch the signals in your smoke?

[Music out]

Noel: A telegraph had been set up near the site of the lynching for reporters, and *The Los Angeles Herald* published one of the most harrowing accounts of Porter's death on November 17, 1900, the day after.

Tyler: Among many other horrific details that we won't recount here, the article reports on a variety of seemingly mundane details that reveal the terrifying consequences of mob logic.

Javon Mays: The effort, the effort to put together this type of thing is what made its sinister nature stand out to me. I just can't imagine, like the day-long process to put together this death spectacle, to invite people, to give him the time to travel by train, to get to [Limon] you don't

even go to Limon, like to like just be doing not. Like you don't go to Limon for anything... So the concept that someone would be going there for this, like and thinking about a statewide effort to be in participation with this, to think about fetching this individual back in the city of Denver. There's just a lot. I just felt. It felt like a whole bunch of people going as far out of their way as they possibly could to make this happen. And I think that's what really stood out to me the most when I first started learning about this, is like, yeah, that effort piece was really alarming to me to think about that.

Noel: Professor Stephen Leonard, who was also part of the Colorado Lynching Memorial Project, says he's always shocked by mob logic and violence, whether it's Preston Porter's lynching or the storming of the U.S. Capitol on January 6, 2021.

Stephen Leonard: It's psychologically somewhat hard for us to grasp. But when mobs get going, they manage to convince themselves of the righteousness of their position. And they become beasts, and they stop, you know, their mental processes, if they ever had, they abandon them. And you get horrible things happening.

Tyler: And it's even more troubling to Leonard that anytime someone is lynched, no one gets real justice.

Stephen Leonard: Well, one of the the huge problems with lynchings is that good investigations are never done, they just say 'We've got our person, we've got our man or our boy and case closed.' And so we'll never know. And that's very, very sad because the victims deserve justice also.

Noel: Like Javon Mays, Anthony Suggs was similarly affected by small details in the *Los Angeles Herald's* account of the macabre fanfare in the hours leading up to the spectacle of Preston's death.

Anthony Suggs: It was a common practice for people to try to get souvenirs at lynchings. And in this case, the souvenirs happened to be pages out of Preston's Bible, that he signed, and tore out, and distributed.

Noel: Then, once the crowd had gathered, and Preston was done giving out autographed pages of his Bible, he was chained to a railroad tie set upright in the ground. A pile of wood and kindling beneath his feet was doused in kerosene and lit on fire by Louise Frost's father.

Tyler: For Anthony Suggs, as a Christian, the parallels between Preston's lynching and the crucifixion of Jesus are impossible to ignore.

Anthony Suggs: There's accounts of him actually reading the gospel of Luke as he was waiting to be killed. You know, one of the sensationalized articles talks about Preston shouting, like screaming as he is burning that, asking God to forgive the people that are doing this to him.

Noel: Onlookers in the mob, the article says, laughed at Porter while he shouted Bible quotations through the flames.

Anthony Suggs: The core belief of my faith, is that God chose to become a human being who was then publicly executed. And that was the moment in which he showed incredible power and solidarity with the oppressed of the earth... So if that is something that my faith is built around, I need to interact with Preston's story in a little bit of a deeper way than just shock.

Tyler: For Activist Judy Ollman, reading the accounts of Preston's death in Stephen Leonard's book was an awakening to the fact that the West had a much more troubling history of racial injustice than she'd ever heard or read about.

Judy Ollman: I saw that lynching was common in Colorado during that time period, but that it was, you know, that phrase, "Frontier Justice," which, of course, is a terrible phrase, because it's not justice at all. Lynching is never justice. But I could, I had a place to put it. That Preston's outside of that. Because it was just so much more brutal, so that's what really made me feel like this has to be, this can't go unnoticed.

Noel: As chance would have it, Suggs and Ollman both reached out to Professor Stephen Leonard around the same time in 2018 after they read Preston's story in his book. They both wanted to know more about the history of racial terror in Colorado and the West, and Preston's story in particular.

Tyler: Leonard didn't know much more about Preston's case than the brief account he'd included in his book, so he got together with Suggs and Ollman.

Noel: The three of them decided it was time for Porter's story to be more widely known.

Judy Ollman: And so then I immediately contacted E.J.I. to see if they had a record of Preston's lynching, and they did, and so it was possible for me to volunteer to organize a remembrance for him through their "Community Remembrance Project."

Noel: E.J.I. stands for the Equal Justice Initiative, an organization dedicated to challenging racial and economic injustice in all areas of the American legal and justice system.

Tyler: It was started by a Black public interest lawyer named Bryan Stevenson in 1989. He'd been working with unrepresented Black prisoners on death row in Montgomery, Alabama, and ended up dedicating his life to seeking justice for the disproportionate number of incarcerated Black men in US prisons.

Tyler: Here's Stevenson speaking in a TED Talk he gave in March of 2012.

https://www.ted.com/talks/bryan_stevenson_we_need_to_talk_about_an_injustice?language=en

This country is very different today than it was 40 years ago. In 1972, there were 300,000 people in jails and prisons. Today, there are 2.3 million. The United States now has the highest rate of incarceration in the world. We have 7 million people on probation and parole, and mass incarceration, in my judgement, has fundamentally changed our world. In poor communities and communities of color, there is this despair, there is this hopelessness that is being shaped by these outcomes. One out of three Black men between the ages of 18 and 30 is in jail, in prison, on probation or parole.

Tyler: Judy Ollman found out about Stevenson's work when she read his bestselling 2018 memoir *Just Mercy* the same year.

Judy Ollman: I mean, his goal was to really shed light on our history. I mean, what he saw was, I mean, what he saw in the work that he did, working with inmates on death row was, first of all,

that lynching had never ended. It had just moved from being outside of the justice system to being within the justice system. And then he realized we have to shed a light on our history because people aren't even aware of what lynching was like. I mean, even that it went on and just the brutality of it. That it wasn't just lynching. I mean, he coined this term "racial terror lynching" because it was a, it was a means to subjugate Black people.

Noel: Stevenson wanted the The Equal Justice Initiative and the remembrance of lynching victims to reach far beyond the walls of the museum. And in 2018, The E.J.I. created the The National Memorial for Peace and Justice, also known as The Lynching Memorial.

Tyler: Stevenson's work led him not only to seek justice for those who were in prison, but also to remember and memorialize as many Black people as possible who had been unjustly lynched in the United States.

Judy Oilman: His vision was that this memorial wouldn't just be in Montgomery, Alabama, but that it would reach into every community where a lynching had happened, which would do two things. One, it would recognize that the person that was lynched was a human being with family in a community. So it would recognize that individual person. But then it would also bring the history of that terrible act into the community where it happened, so that the community would have the chance to reckon with that, to look at their past and acknowledge it and, you know, hopefully heal from it.

Noel: Sometimes, when there's community buy in, placards, or memorial sculptures are erected to honor the victims.

Tyler: But in all cases, jars of soil are collected from the sites of racial terror lynchings and sent to the Lynching Memorial in Alabama to join the many other jars along a wall of jars with the names of the victims.

Noel: By partnering with the Equal Justice Initiative and the Lynching Memorial, Ollman and Suggs saw an opportunity to bring national attention to Porter's story and the history of racial terror lynching in Colorado.

Tyler: They also got in touch with Rosemary Lytle at the NAACP and began to organize a community remembrance and soil collection ceremony for Preston Porter Jr. in Limon.

[Music]

Javon Mays:

On the eastern plains of Colorado

The wind can be spellbinding.

Some say it can even sweep.

And Lord, how he watched them sweep you under our flag rug

Swept your remains that you had not.

But I think of a sweep, Preston

And how it can be uplifting

How it can carry you when you can't carry yourself

Oh, I know wind

Out here in these plains

They farm wind

To recharge

Turnbinded

They watch their houses cradle themselves to sleep

But at night

When it's just you and the moon

If you listen real deep

You can hear the wind howl.

[Music Out]

Noel: Limon, Colorado sits just off I-70, halfway between Denver and the Kansas border in Lincoln County. It hasn't changed a whole lot in a hundred and twenty years.

Tyler: In 1900, Limon had a population of nine hundred and seventy. And thirteen Black people lived in all of Lincoln County. As of the 2020 Census, Limon has only grown by a few hundred residents. There were no Black people counted, 13% identified as "Hispanic", 1% identified as Asian, 1% as Pacific Islander, and the remaining 85% as white.

Noel: The largest employer in town is a state prison, and few who travel past it on Interstate 70 stop for anything much more than a tank of gas just off the interchange at Highway 24.

Tyler: When Rosemary Lytle, Anthony Suggs, Judy Ollman, Javon Mays, and several others formed the Colorado Lynching Memorial Project to commemorate Preston Porter's life and remember his death, no one expected the town of Limon to be excited, or to welcome them.

Noel: Poet Javon Mays wasn't the least bit surprised that there was zero mention of Porter's lynching in the small Limon Heritage Museum where the committee decided to hold the remembrance in November of 2018.

Tyler: What did surprise Mays was the unflinching way the committee made its presence and intentions in Limon known without apology.

Javon Mays: What's interesting is the kind of that initial resistance from that environment to engage in Preston's narrative. And one of the cool blessings of this project is the partnership with Equal Justice Initiative, because they are pretty frank. And they're frank in ways that I'm not even used to being frank as a Coloradoan, right? When I'm going to enter an environment that is potentially racist, I know that I need to throw on, you know, I need to put pillows on my hands. I need to be very gentle in the way that I manage this environment. I need to be very observational. I need to keep my cards close to my chest. I need to be welcoming, and all these other things, and to see some of those folks be pretty frank and being like "We're going to have this event here. You can help us run this event or you can't. Here's what some of the environments who like didn't help, would kind of look like afterwards, so I suggest that you help. And then like watching folks kind of concede..."

Noel: The unapologetic reclaiming of space in Limon, demanding that the community own its history was an important way for the committee to honor Preston, says Anthony Suggs.

Tyler: He credits this bold approach to Rosemary Lytle of the NAACP and Reverend Tawanna Davis, one of the co-founders of Soul 2 Soul Sisters, an organization with a "Black Women-led, faith-based response to anti-Black violence."

Anthony Suggs: I remember the morning that we met to sort of memorialize the fact that this whole day began in Denver, where Preston was held at the old city jail... Tawana reminded us all that Preston, screaming for God to forgive the people that were doing this to him, was not this sort of subservient, you know, all-patience blackness that I think a lot of white people are more comfortable with. A blackness that is quick to forgive and doesn't want justice. But Tawana reminded us that that was Preston really claiming his his solidarity with with Jesus, and Jesus' experience of being killed publicly and taking on that power to say, "Even though you're doing this to me right now, you have no power over me" ...That was him taking on his power... the only way he could in that moment.

Tyler: Though the exact location of his lynching is no longer known, in October of 2020 there was a small soil-gathering ceremony along the train tracks near where Preston died.

Noel: Then, a month later, a day after the 118th anniversary of his lynching, a group of close to a hundred people gathered at the Limon Heritage Center to remember him and reflect on the ongoing significance of his death.

Tyler: The soil that had been collected near the train tracks sat in a bowl on the center of a table at the front of the room in between two glass jars as the various committee members spoke.

Noel: Here's Rosemary Lytle at the ceremony:

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Gt1UIk8NYOI>

We cannot mourn and memorialize Preston Porter Jr. but fail to mourn and memorialize Michael Brown, Eric Garner, Jordan Davis, Sandra Bland, Freddie Gray, Philando Castile. When we say

his name, we must say their names. Say their names. Racism, hate, white supremacy, white fragility, white jealousy. All of those things remain threats that hang over all Black people, even today. Even those with money, with education, with titles, with positions, and those without, can be killed by the police for any reason.

Tyler: And Anothony Suggs:

Anthony Suggs: *We all have a part to play in this. We all fit into the story somehow. And I encourage everyone to think about where you fit in, as we all come forward to put our piece into the jars.*

Tyler: After everyone spoke, attendees were invited to come forward and move a handful of soil from the bowl to each of the two jars.

Javon Mays:

And they say that wolves wailed to the sky to call in the pack.

And if this is true

Then what else is a howl

But a song calling us in to a choir of chords

Bottled in confession and confusion

Teenaged and tormented

Wondering if it was ever heard

And somewhere

Under all that brimstone

Under all that char in that Holocaust combustion

Was a song constructed by a Preston Porter Jr.

We learn your chords every time we hear the wind howl on the eastern plains

Calling us in

Reminding us that we have some songs to teach.

[End of poem, music out]

Noel: Javon Mays, who read this poem, “For Preston,” at the ceremony, was struck by the way the event echoed the history in healing ways.

Javon Mays: But then us getting there and not expecting the audience who, you know, again, it's almost, this is I've never actually thought about this, but it's almost like Preston's, you know, death moment replayed in this really cool, unique way because people came from all over the state to be at this moment.

Tyler: Bringing Porter's memory back into that space, and back into the history of the community that collectively took his life was a crucial part of what the ceremony was meant to do.

Javon Mays: When the history of Limon, Colorado is told, they have to tell it now with him. Quite frankly, I don't know, but I imagine if you Google Limon, Preston might be the first person who comes up, right? You can't just scrape folks, put them aside and just don't expect, expect, expect. You know, when you dismiss their return, they're here, they're present. And that's what history is supposed to do, you know?

Noel: For Anthony Suggs and other members of the Colorado Lynching Memorial Project, remembering Preston isn't just about Limon. And certainly isn't about punishing Limon for its history.

Tyler: It's all about Colorado and about the West reckoning with the history of racial terror and lynching.

Anthony Suggs: I think most folks get the sense that Colorado is this very egalitarian, Western progressive state for the most part. So when you're confronted with... What I think is one of the most horrific lynchings in American history, it can really shock and challenge your your view of the state, whether you've lived here for a year or lived here your whole life... So I think a lot of folks, have a really strong reaction to this, when they first hear about it. Mostly of shock, sometimes of sorrow, sometimes discomfort, "I don't want to engage with this anymore" or a discomfort that leads folks like Judy and myself to want to engage with it even more.

Tyler: Professor Stephen Leonard says that so-called "frontier justice" is especially damaging because it perpetuates the myth that there was no legal system to handle criminal charges.

Stephen Leonard: You had to tame the West, you had to deal with these bad guys. And if you dealt with it quickly, that's that's just fine because it was the you know, otherwise the poor little settlers would have been preyed upon. Well, you know, courts were functioning after 1861. Anybody could have been legally tried. I mean, it's just silly to take the position that somehow we were doing a good thing.

Tyler: And this extrajudicial way of handling things was often validated by leading intellectual supporters of westward expansion.

Stephen Leonard: The historian Frederick Jackson Turner wrote admiringly of the no-nonsense approach of the frontier backwoodsman, intolerant, “intolerant of men who split hairs or scruple over the method of reaching the right.”

Noel: Black people, American Indians, and people of Mexican heritage and descent were all inconvenient reminders that the settlement and development of the United States came at their expense in ways that Americans are still struggling to reckon with.

Tyler: Giving them due process would mean acknowledging their equality not just as citizens, but as humans.

Noel: Javon Mays says the work it takes to confront painful history isn't supposed to be easy.

Javon Mays: When you're doing this work, you know that there's going to be resistance. If there wasn't, they would have already done the work, right? You know what I mean? So, you know that you're going to encounter some kind of resistance. You don't know what it is. And I don't think it's fair to assume you know what it is, right?

Tyler: But Anthony Suggs says until we see our history and all the pain it caused, we can't heal, and we can't move forward.

Anthony Suggs: I think for the most part, we are scared to even begin that process because there is so much to unpack. Like even if even if we were just looking at Colorado, you would have to unpack the genocide of Native peoples. You would have to unpack, well, the genocide of Native peoples and cultural genocide of both the Spanish colonial system and the American

colonial system. You would have to unpack the violence against Mexican Americans in Colorado. You'd have to unpack violence against Chinese Americans in Colorado, the forced internment of Japanese Americans in Colorado. And the reality of lynching, redlining, segregation, all of it. And that's just Colorado...

Tyler: The outpouring of rage, grief, sadness, and frustration that flooded the streets after the deaths of George Floyd and, more locally, Elijah McClain, in the summer of 2020 is just one example of how much of that work we still have to do.

Noel: Rosemary Lytle.

Rosemary Lytle: Some people at least, don't think about lynching when they think about some people, at least don't think about lynching, when they think about an official knee on your neck for 9 minutes, or when they think about being stopped in the middle of a road on your way to your first job and ending up dead, supposedly committing suicide in some Texas jail. They don't really think about lynching when they think about Breonna Taylor. But we know that lynching comes in its most obvious forms and comes in other forms. But the bottom line is that the assaults on Black bodies are historic and egregious, and at this point, we've seen enough and we know enough, we've witnessed enough if we have our eyes and hearts open to know why lynching maybe in the American consciousness began with Emmett Till, but didn't end there and still hasn't.

Tyler: But Javon Mays says we need to step beyond the ideological lines in the sand and actually take a look at the whole truth of who we are as a nation.

Javon Mays: You know, I think a big part of some of this is just understanding that it's possible, like in our own histories and all of our histories, that evil can take place... And that if we're complacent, like evil can run wild... When we're talking about Preston Porter. When we're talking about, a Japanese internment camp, and we're talking about, hundreds of people slain in Sand Creek and that's what these events are. This is evil running wild.

Noel: Terri Gentry says that addressing these evils must be done systemically. And she doesn't know if we'll ever fully move forward as a country until we talk about what she sees as the common thread that ties together everything from chattel slavery to mass incarceration, economic inequality, and even the climate crisis.

Terri Gentry: One of the challenges is that it took 4 billion years to form the planet and all of these things, it's taken 500 years to destroy it. And when you look at everything that's happening on the planet, the umbrella is capitalism, and then dropping out of the umbrella are all of these other things that feed capitalism. I don't know how you change that. I don't know. Because it's been a work in progress for 150 years or more, and we're still fighting the same issues that we fought when slavery ended. And the fact of the matter is slavery hasn't ended, when you look at all of these different institutions that still perpetuate it... I don't know how you change it. I don't know. I hope we can. The hope is always there. I will never stop hoping, and I will never stop praying for that change to happen. But it's pretty bleak.

[Music]

Javon Mays:

Sometimes I wonder. At what age do we know our songs?

At what time do our bodies become our melodies

our cadences

our chords?

I can still hear my grandma humming a ditty into a meal.

And I wonder what your father's saying, Preston.

To trick you and your brother's hunger into bedtime

to trick the house into cradling itself to sleep.

Yeah, sometimes I wonder.

I wonder if we all have the same fascinations of fire.

Lord knows you must not.

The act of putting a fresh log into the stove and watching the house cradle itself to sleep.

Do you ever wonder where embers go?

Have you imagined the return to the sun?

I hope you did, Preston. Because a star ain't nothing but a fire.

You know, I've gathered lumber for long winters

And I know you know such work

How to get into a log hurling rhythm

How to check up speed to stack fast

They call a full truck but a fire with a chord

And for four chords

To get you through the winter.

But there goes your chords again.

Did you get to know your song, Preston?

They say in music, a chord is a harmony of three notes,

And I think about you signing the pages of the Gospel of Luke

Tearing them out

And handing them to your future executioners

One

Two

Three

And how they used those as invitations to your concert

Your solo on that stake

The terror on that tie

The cadence of your chains

The choral of your kerosene

Accenting a symphony of splinters as your throat became their justice.

Do you think they heard you, Preston?

Did they register the register of your wails, your weeping?

Did they, Preston?

Did they hear your family in your lungs

As you went from kin to kindling?

Did they see your human as your skin molted?

Did they catch the signals in your smoke?

On the eastern plains of Colorado

The wind can be spellbinding

Some say it can even sweep.

And Lord, how he watched them sweep you under our flag rug

Swept your remains that you had not.

But I think of a sweep, Preston

And how it can be uplifting

How it can carry you when you can't carry yourself

Oh, I know wind

Out here in these plains

*They farm wind
To recharge
Turnbinded
They watch their houses cradle themselves to sleep
But at night
When it's just you and the moon
If you listen real deep
You can hear the wind howl.
And they say that wolves wailed to the sky to call in the pack.
And if this is true
Then what else is a howl
But a song calling us in to a choir of chords
Bottled in confession and confusion
Teenaged and tormented
Wondering if it was ever heard
And somewhere
Under all that brimstone
Under all that char in that Holocaust combustion
Was a song constructed by a Preston Porter Jr.
We learn your chords every time we hear the wind howl on the eastern plains
Calling us in
Reminding us that we have some songs to teach.*

Tyler: As we mentioned at the beginning, the racial violence discussed in this episode is disturbing. For information and resources on racial trauma, please visit this season's website at historycolorado.org/losthighways.

[End theme post]

Tyler: *Lost Highways* is a production of History Colorado and History Colorado Studios.

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Noel: If you enjoyed this podcast and want to support it, please become a member of History Colorado. You can get 20% off your membership at historycolorado.org/podcastdiscount. Plus you get all kinds of great benefits like free admission to our 8 museums around the state, where you can learn more about the stories we tell on *Lost Highways*. And a subscription to the award-winning *The Colorado Magazine*, which includes access to insightful articles and compelling perspectives on Colorado's past.

Tyler: And even if you don't become a member, you can still get \$2 off admission to any of our museums just by mentioning the podcast.

Noel: A very special thanks to Susan Schulten, our History advisor on this episode, and to Managing Editor of Publications Natasha Gardner and Chief Creative Officer Jason Hanson, our story editors.

Tyler: And to Ann Sneesby-Koch for newspaper and periodical research.

Noel: Our Assistant Producer is María José Maddox. And Luke Perkins is our intern.

Tyler: If you'd like to see a transcript of any of our episodes, either as a matter of accessibility, or because you'd like to use Lost Highways in your classroom, you can find them at historycolorado.org/losthighways.

Noel: Tyler Hill, my co-host, composed the music for this episode. Our theme is by Conor Bourgal.

Noel: Many thanks to our editorial team:

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Jonathan Futa

Charlie Woolley

Susan Schulten

Tom Romero

and **Cara DeGette**

Noel: Finally, thanks to the entire staff at History Colorado. I'm Noel Black

Tyler: And I'm Tyler Hill. Thanks for listening.