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Black man, bogeyman



By Malcolm Smith

Two weeks ago, according to her confession, a woman sent her two young sons to their death at the bottom of a lake, still strapped into their ironically named safety seats, and then proceeded to cover her crime by telling the authorities that her children were kidnapped in a car-jacking. The culprit, she said, was a black man.

The black man, the stereotypical criminal. Black, the color of most street thugs on television shows, the image you see when you picture a crack dealer or convenience store robber. Willie Horton.

After Smith told police about the car-jacking by the black man, they proceeded to investigate many black men in the southern town of Union, South Carolina. Some African-Americans say they were questioned intensely and threatened by townspeople.

"The whites acted so different. They wouldn't speak, they'd look at you and then reach over and lock their doors. And all because that lady lied," resident Hester Booker said.

Granted, police were doing their job, and in the end the boys' mother confessed to the crime.

This is not just a relic of the slave-owning South. It happened here in Maine two months ago. A 7-year-old girl in the town of Dexter told police that she had been sexually assaulted by a black man after she had gotten off her school bus. Two other children corroborated her story.

A few days later the story was found to be untrue.

"It seemed so believable," resident Roger Wintle said.

And that's the problem. When we think of blacks, we think of criminals, and when we think of criminals, we think of blacks.

Perhaps that is why people like Susan Smith and the 7-year-old Dexter girl chose the black man as their mythical attackers.

For some reason we think of the Willie Horton-type African-American. We do not think of accomplished African-Americans such as Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr., Malcolm X., Supreme Court Justice Thurgood Marshall, Dr. Alvin Poussaint of Harvard Medical School, Dr. Jocelyn Elders, Surgeon General of the United States, Bill Cosby, Angela Davis, Oprah Winfrey, Jessie Owens... the list is endless.

Granted, blacks proportionally commit more crimes. The reasons are more complex than the color of their skins, though, and to even discuss the reasons, such as years of discrimination, during some of which African-Americans were not even allowed to learn to read under penalty of law, risks the penalty of being accused of being too liberal.

The black community does hold some responsibility here, however. UMaine has just formed its own chapter of the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People. You have your work cut out for you, NAACP. Let's hope you can turn some of these generations-old stereotypes around. Good Luck.

In the end, hopefully the residents of Union, S.C. have learned a lesson. Hopefully we all have.

The majority of thought in Union in the African-American and White communities, as it is across the nation, is for the two children who lost their lives so tragically, so senselessly. Their deaths are heartbreaking.

But, when the mourning ends, we all must deal with the undercurrent of racism that goes on. It is real, undeniable, and it is growing.