

July 1, 2001---

DULUTH, Minn.--The first verses of Bob Dylan's "Desolation Row" are devoted to the June 15, 1920, lynching of three black men in downtown Duluth. The singer-songwriter was born at St. Mary's Hospital in the Central Hillside neighborhood of Duluth and spent the early years of his life in the working-class city along Lake Superior.

Duluth is a pragmatic city which in 1920 had a predominantly German-American and Scandinavian population. Values were as crisp as the Minnesota air. Lynch laws were uncommon in such straightforward northern cities.

In June of 1920 a Duluth woman accused six traveling circus workers of assaulting her behind a circus tent. All 200 black men on the circus train were rounded up. Several were singled out. And out of those, Elmer Jackson, 19; Isaac McGhie, 20, and Elias Clayton, 19, were taken from a downtown jail by a white mob and dragged a block and a half.

They were beaten, kicked, spat upon, choked and hung from a lamppost.

Dylan's father, Abram Zimmerman, was 9 years old at the time. The family lived a couple of blocks away from the lynching site at what is now a parking lot at 221 Lake Ave. North. Zimmerman passed the story down to his son.

"Desolation Row" begins this way:

They're selling postcards of the hanging/they're painting the passports brown

The beauty parlor is filled with sailors/the circus is in town....

And the riot squad they're restless/they need somewhere to go

As Lady and I look out tonight/From Desolation Row.

It is a new morning in Duluth.

The city of 85,000 rises above the rock bluffs overlooking Lake Superior and the southern tip of the St. Louis River. A forgiving soul is retained within the bluffs, formed from an ancient lava flow that gives Duluth a mini-San Francisco feel.

Dylan left Duluth when he was 6 years old. Abram moved his family an hour northwest to Hibbing, Minn., where he opened a hardware store, but there are still a couple of Dylan sites worth checking out while checking Duluth's inner spirit.

The first home in which Dylan lived remains at 517-519 N. 3rd Ave. East,

overlooking Lake Superior in the Central Hillside area. This is the duplex that fetched \$94,600 earlier this week in an eBay auction. Stephen Rueff of Minneapolis was the winning bidder, edging out Madison, Wis., Dylan collector Bill Pagel--who owns a high chair once used by Dylan.

And the Duluth Armory still stands on South 13th Avenue and London Road across the street from Lake Superior. The 86-year-old building is now used as a community center. In late March, 1959, an 18-year-old Dylan traveled from Hibbing to Duluth to see Buddy Holly and the Crickets, Richie Valens and the Big Bopper appear at the armory. A week later Holly, Valens and the Big Bopper perished in a plane crash after takeoff from the airport in Mason City, Iowa. Dylan never forgot the Holly concert.

Duluth will never forget the lynchings.

On the sunny morning of Friday, June 15, nearly 250 people gathered in downtown Duluth. A silent march down the same route the mob followed to the lynching site was organized by the Clayton, Jackson, McGhie Memorial Committee. "Our goal in the next few years is to have 10,000 people--or more than those 'which numbered between 5,000 and 10,000' at the lynching," said Catherine Dakota, committee co-chair, before the march.

"The people of Duluth have a contrite heart," added C. E. "Sonny" Scroggins, a civil rights activist who represented the city of Topeka, Kan., in the walk. "And God likes a contrite heart."

Lynching victim Elmer Jackson was from Topeka. In 1992 a bridge in Topeka was renamed the Elmer Jackson Memorial Bridge. Scroggins added, "Those in the majority must take responsibility for initiating continued change. We must always face what's happened here in Duluth and communities across this nation. If good people do not speak out against hatred, it will only flourish and harm all."

The mostly white group solemnly walked through the downtown streets to the lynching site.

The procession moved east down Superior Street for a moment of silence at the Duluth Jail, 126 Superior St. The three men were forcibly removed from the red brick jail. The freewheeling Prohibition era had contributed to the mob psychology. In the immaculately researched book *The Lynchings in Duluth* (Minnesota Historical Society Press, St. Paul, \$14.95) author Michael Fedo writes, ". . . The mob howled and immediately set upon the two, beating, kicking, spitting and cursing as McGhie and Jackson were forced through a narrow opening of the cell room door and led out before the wild and shrieking mass on Superior Street. McGhie and Jackson were literally thrown from hands to hands; their shirts and jackets ripped until the two were naked to the waist." The third man, Clayton, was brought to the lynching site a half hour after the first two hangings, pleading

innocence.

Months after the lynching, another carnival worker was convicted of the crime, but he was released five years into a 30-year sentence. Three members of the mob were convicted of rioting. Each man served two years or less.

The lynching was photographed. The lifeless bodies of the three men hung from a lamppost. A mob of white men looked away from the lamppost into the cowardly lure of the camera. The picture later appeared on postcards.

The contrite marchers slowly turned north and walked uphill to the lynching site on the northeast corner of Second Avenue East and First Street. A poster in the window of a Second Avenue storefront promoted an upcoming concert by The Crickets, of Buddy Holly fame.

Near the front of the silent march a woman carried a bouquet of flowers and a plaque the committee will have placed on the building. The plaque reads: "Here They Were Taken . . .," followed by the victims' names.

In the middle of the march, a white Duluth policeman walking in strong strides, gently extended his right hand to the left hand of a 6-year-old African-American girl.

They walked up the hill together.

They locked hands and looked forward.

The purpose of the Clayton, Jackson, McGhie Memorial Committee is to gain placement of a permanent memorial marker and restoration park across the street from the site. The park, which will be built within the next two years, will be a place where visitors can go to restore their souls and spirits. Unlike any historical monument in Duluth, the marker and park will be created with full cooperation of the city of Duluth and the Minnesota Historical Society.

"Simply forgetting about this day will not suffice," said Duluth Mayor Gary Doty, adding that a human-rights ordinance will soon be presented to the Duluth City Council. "Attempts to enact human rights ordinances in Duluth failed in 1976, 1980 and 1984. It is time we put our feeling into words."

That's what Dylan did. Horrific stories such as the Clayton, Jackson and McGhie lynchings helped formulate Dylan's protest voice.

"Desolation Row" appears on Dylan's breakthrough 1965 album "Highway 61 Revisited." An emotional socio-political travelogue, the album begins with the timeless anthem of independence "Like a Rolling Stone" and ends with "Desolation Row," an 11-minute folk narrative featuring late Chicagoan Mike Bloomfield's bolero-like guitar licks.

There is little doubt Dylan was thinking about race issues. According to The Bob Dylan Companion (Schirmer Books, 1998 PRICE TO COME) Dylan told Izzy Young, the founder of New York's Folklore Center, that in 1962 he had written "The Ballad for Emmett Till," about the 14-year-old Chicagoan who in 1955 was kidnapped and lynched by three white men in Money, Miss.

At the age of 21, Dylan's mission was moving far away from Duluth.

Downtown Duluth is a mishmash of antique stores, independently owned Native American shops like Tony's Trading Post and workingmen's bars. The proposed restoration park and monument site is across the street from the Cozy Bar, a skid row tavern that was open the morning of the silent march. A handful of Native Americans looked at the lynching site from the windows of their efficiency apartments above the bar. This is the Central Hillside neighborhood in which Dylan was born.

A brisk breeze rolls through downtown off Lake Superior. During the early 1900s, the Hay Fever Club of America was headquartered in Duluth. The WPA Guide to Minnesota--first published in 1938--reported, "Hay fever sufferers have long been a source of tourist trade."

America's sneezy economy hits Duluth hard because labor is tied to iron ore, factories such as General Mills and the shipping industry. The Lake Superior Marine Museum Association even prints a free daily Duluth Shipping News with details of ship arrivals and departures. The 49-year-old Kinsman Independent was docked in the harbor during my visit. She was making a regular run between Duluth and Buffalo, N.Y., bringing wheat from Midwestern farms to Buffalo flour mills.

Canal Park is three blocks from downtown along Lake Superior. Canal Park is the center of Duluth's nightlife activity. Old harbor warehouses have been renovated into retail shops, galleries and hotels. Ryan Kapaun was my tour guide during my two-day stay in Duluth.

Kapaun is quite a guy. He is director of media relations for the Duluth-Superior Dukes baseball team of the independent Northern League. He is a member of the Clayton, Jackson, McGhie Memorial Committee. This fall he will be a senior at the University of Minnesota/Duluth, where he is majoring in communication. He is a huge Bob Dylan fan who has studied the "Desolation Row" connection.

And he is all of 21 years old.

He was born about the time Dylan's "Shot of Love" came out. Yikes!

"There's a line in the song about 'brown passports,' " Kapaun explained while

driving his red and rust 1990 Nissan Sentra up to Enger Tower, which overlooks the entire city. "That line has been linked to the color of the skin, or even the brown uniforms of the Nazis, linking the persecution of Jews in Germany to the persecution of African-Americans in the U.S. And the line: 'The beauty parlor is filled with sailors,' well, Duluth is a shipping port, so obviously there's sailors all over the place. A sailor actually tied the knot in the lynching noose."

Kapaun took me for a beer at Grandma's Saloon & Grill in Canal Park, built in a former bordello used for loggers and sailors. A logger-type-guy in a Minnesota Vikings sweatshirt overheard us talking about Dylan and baseball. He asked me and Kapaun if we were father and son. Kapaun looks like he's 18. I look as old as Dylan. I answered, "Nope," and continued talking about "Blood on the Tracks" and how much I'm worried about Cubs reclamation project Jason Bere.

About a half hour later the logger-type-guy stood next to me at the urinals in Grandma's men's room. He looked me in the eye and said, "I sure can't figure you f-----s out."

Actually, Kapaun's father and mother are Dylan fans.

His father Steve, 54, is a truck driver, his mother Linda, 43, is a photographer. They live St. Paul. Kapaun said that after he read *The Lynchings in Duluth* he printed out the lyrics of Dylan's "Desolation Row." Kapaun said, "I began to analyze it and it was unbelievable. Everything kept fitting into place. Everything about Dylan is so close to you here."

When you get to Duluth, take time to follow the footsteps of the city's rich history. Walk up the hill along Second Avenue East. Think about how far you've come. Turn around and look at Lake Superior. You, too, will feel the winds of change.