

## Historian hopes to bring "Scottsboro Boys" alive for celebration of slavery abolition

SCOTTSBORO, AL - The case has had a hold on Dr. Kwando Kinshasa for 30 years, but he has never been inside the Jackson County Courthouse, site of the first of the infamous "Scottsboro Boys" trials.

On Thursday afternoon, just a few hours after arriving from New York City, he passes through the south entrance, exchanging pleasantries with the sheriff's deputies by the metal detector.

He climbs the stairs to the second floor and enters Courtroom No. 3. A woman steps out of the office next to the courtroom.

"This is the bench," she tells Kinshasa.

This is the desk that was used by Judge Alfred E. Hawkins when the first trial began on April 6, 1931, six days after nine black teenagers known as the "Scottsboro Boys" were charged with raping two white women from Huntsville.

Perhaps no other case in American history produced so many trials, retrials and reversals. It led to two major U.S. Supreme Court rulings and some of the sharpest divisions between the North and South since the Civil War.

Kinshasa touches the desk, examines it, and thinks again of Clarence Norris, one of the nine defendants.

"OK," he says, clearly moved. "Interesting. Now, the question is, if Norris was here, what would he say? Nothing, probably."

But today, when the Scottsboro Boys Museum and Cultural Center holds its first Juneteenth celebration - a day to celebrate the abolition of slavery - Kinshasa plans to bring Norris to life.

Kinshasa, 71, is a professor of African-American studies at John Jay College, a college of the City University of New York.

In 2003, he published his first book, "The Man from Scottsboro," Norris' account of the trial and incident.

"I brought a 10- to 15-minute DVD of Norris, which I'll show (today), so folks can actually see the man," Kinshasa says.

The DVD is of Kinshasa's 1986 interview with Norris. Kinshasa believes he has the only audio- and video-taped interviews with one of the "Scottsboro Boys."

"He discusses what it meant to be on death row," Kinshasa says. "He demonstrated that he was fearless and (had) the curiosity of youth - and, considering the situation he was in, the immense belief in his innocence."

An example of Norris' fearlessness, he said, was when he was on death row at Kilby Prison near Montgomery.

"One of the guards let him into the room where he ... smelled the flesh of individuals who were executed," Kinshasa says. "He wanted to sit in the (electric) chair and see how it felt."

### **'He's inside of me'**

Kinshasa flew into Huntsville late Thursday morning and drove his rental car to Scottsboro.

On the way, he slowed down in Paint Rock, where a Southern locomotive stopped and a group of local men, headed by Deputy Sheriff Charlie Latham of Trenton, arrested the "Scottsboro Boys."

Kinshasa looked through a clearing and saw the railroad tracks behind a row of mostly abandoned businesses - the site of the arrests.

It was his second trip to Paint Rock. Around 1982, two years after he had met Norris, Kinshasa drove to Jackson County on a Sunday afternoon.

The courthouse square was almost deserted, except for an elderly white man sitting on a bench.

"A typical Southern scene," Kinshasa says. "I looked at him, and he looked at me. There was nothing else to be said."

This time, though, there is much more to his trip. There is today's celebration, a fundraiser at the Scottsboro Boys Museum and Cultural Center on West Willow Street.

Reverberating within Kinshasa, there is also Norris' spirit. Sitting in his rental car as a heavy rain falls on the courthouse square on Thursday, Kinshasa says, "I feel like he's inside of me today. I'm bringing his words, his feelings."

Norris was the last of the living "Scottsboro Boys" and the only one to receive an official pardon - in 1976 from then-Gov. George Wallace.

Kinshasa knew Norris for the last nine years of his life, until Norris' death in 1989. Their relationship was such that Kinshasa's children knew him as "Uncle Norris."

He was a tall man - about 6-foot-2, by Kinshasa's estimate - who was known among the Kinshasas for his formal dress and friendly, gentlemanly ways.

"So when I come back here for this event, it's fulfillment to represent the spirit of Norris and the other defendants," Kinshasa says. "If Norris were alive, he would not come here. Norris' attorneys had to plead with him to go to (Alabama) to get his pardon."

After a while, the rain stops. Kinshasa climbs out of his rental car, surveys the northeast side of the courthouse, and remembers some scenes from the first trial.

The snapshots have stayed with him all these years, growing in significance since his first meeting with Norris in 1980, because he regards the story of Norris and the others as heroic.

It is heroic, in Kinshasa's estimation, because the "Scottsboro Boys" managed to "survive the duplicity of the American judicial system," as he puts it.

On Thursday afternoon, he touches one of the last symbols of the American judicial system of 1931 and thinks of Norris again.

"I could see him sizing up this desk," Kinshasa says.