

BY GARY MAVEAL

A special community education project – the Sweet Trials Project – is in the works here at the University of Detroit Mercy.

The project is a consortium of faculty, librarians, public agencies, and civic groups to educate about the landmark trials of Ossian Sweet in 1925 and 1926. Project co-chairs, Dean Charles Marske of UDM College of Liberal Arts and retired Wayne County Circuit Judge Claudia Morcom, have assembled a working group which includes many community leaders.

The impetus for the Sweet Trials Project is UDM's Theatre Company revival of its award-winning docudrama, "Malice Aforethought: The Sweet Trials" during February 2007. The play will help celebrate Black History Month with readings and discussions on the state of race relations in Detroit and the historical significance of the Sweet case.

"Malice Aforethought," by UDM playwright-in-residence Dr. Arthur J. Beer, was first presented 20 years ago as part of the Michigan Sesquicentennial in 1987. It recounts the story of two historic trials at which Clarence Darrow defended an African American family who had fired on a white mob while defending their home.

Recorders Court Judge Frank Murphy presided at the trial, which attracted the support of the recently-formed ACLU, NAACP and the Urban League.

Background of the Sweet Trials

In 1925, Dr. Ossian Sweet, 31, his young wife, and their two-year-old child moved into an all-white neighborhood at 2905 Charlevoix on Detroit's east side. Dr. Sweet feared for his family's safety because other blacks moving into white districts had been threatened in recent incidents.

Dr. Sweet brought his brothers Henry and Otis and several other men to stay with his family when they moved into their new house. The men had brought guns with them. As night fell, an angry mob filled the street in the Sweets' front yard and began throwing rocks at their house. Shots were fired from inside the house killing one white man and wounding another.

All of the occupants in the house were arrested and charged with premeditated murder. Henry Sweet admitted to firing a gun from inside the house. The NAACP called on a 68-year-old Clarence Darrow who had just concluded the famous Scopes "monkey" trial the summer before in Dayton, Tennessee, to defend the Sweet family.

