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A racist mob, a historic trial

Chesterfield Township library shares story of Ossian Sweet

March 11, 2007

BY MELANIE D. SCOTT
 FREE PRESS STAFF WRITER

Martin Luther King Jr. and Malcolm X are two names familiar to Emma Meehan, but Ossian Sweet stumped her.

"We talked about Martin Luther King and Malcolm X in school during Black History Month," said Emma, 13, of Chesterfield Township. "I had no idea who Ossian Sweet was until I saw this. I didn't know something like this happened in Detroit. You hear about this kind of stuff happening in the South."

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Emma is one of many Chesterfield Township Library patrons who learned more about Sweet thanks to a University of Detroit-Mercy exhibit that teaches about the black physician's arrest in 1925 after a white man was killed outside Sweet's home.

Sweet, the grandson of slaves, had just moved into a house on the east side of Detroit, and a mob gathered outside the house, hoping to drive him out of the neighborhood.

The next day, the mob returned, throwing rocks and bricks, but this time shots were fired and a white man ended up dead. Sweet, his wife, Gladys, and nine other black people at the home were arrested.

The historic civil rights case went on to receive national attention at the time.

"This display illustrates the key people involved in the trial and shows the courtroom," said Sue

Shepperly, reference librarian at Chesterfield Township Library. "I think this is really important because we don't get these kinds of exhibits out here. It's good to share this with the community."

The exhibit, which is traveling among public libraries in Macomb, Oakland and Wayne counties, also is a part of this year's Everyone's Reading program.

This year's book for the Everyone's Reading Program is "Arc of Justice: A Saga of Race, Civil Rights, and Murder in the Jazz Age" by Kevin Boyle. The book, which won the National Book Award for nonfiction in 2004, is about the Sweet trials.

"We have three book discussion groups at the library right now who are talking about the book," Shepperly said. "It was a time period that a lot of people don't think about. The 1920s was a pivotal decade."

The exhibit, which went on display at the Chesterfield Township Library March 2, has already been seen by patrons of the St. Clair Shores Public Library, the Shelby Township Library and the Macomb County Library. The display will be shown at the Rochester Hills Public Library on March 13.

"I think the exhibit is very interesting because a lot of black people immigrated to the north for a better life," said 13-year-old John Remus from New Baltimore. "Some white people helped them, but there was still prejudice involved. We've been learning about black history in school, but this exhibit makes me want to learn more."

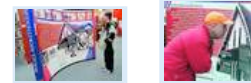
PHOTOS

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(ROBERT McKEAN/Special to the Free Press)

David Nicholas of Chesterfield Township examines a traveling University of Detroit Mercy exhibit on the trials involving Dr. Ossian Sweet displayed at the Chesterfield Township Library.



ADDITIONAL INFORMATION

Discussions on the Sweet case and its era

From now until the end of April, area libraries will feature discussions about the 1920s, Dr. Ossian Sweet and Kevin Boyle's book, "Arc of Justice: A Saga of Race, Civil Rights, and Murder in the Jazz Age." For more information, call the libraries below.

• **Chesterfield Township Library, 50560 Patricia Ave. 586-598-4900.**

Events: Detroit Jazz History, 7 p.m. April 16. Detroit's Infamous Purple Gang, 7 p.m. April 26.

• **Clinton-Macomb Public Library, 40900 Romeo Plank Road, Clinton Twp. 586-226-5000.**

Events: Dr. Isaiah McKinnon: The Life and Trial of Dr. Ossian Sweet, 6:30 p.m. March 21. Book Discussion of "Arc of Justice," 7 p.m. March 27. Meet author Kevin Boyle, 1 p.m. April 16.

• **Harper Woods Public Library, 19601 Harper Ave. 313-343-2575.**

Events: Book discussions of "Arc of Justice" with Harper Woods Library Book Club at 1:30 p.m. March 14; 7 p.m.

The Chesterfield library posted the dates for the exhibit in its newsletters and sent out invitations to various schools in hopes that people would stop by to see the 6-by-9-foot freestanding exhibit.

"I come to the library often, so when I see an exhibit in the middle of the room, I'm going to look at it," said David Nicholas, 50, of Chesterfield Township. "It looks really nice, and it's well done."

After the exhibit moves on, the Chesterfield library will continue to highlight Boyle's book with events April 16 and April 26 and with a book discussion at 2 p.m. April 16 at Presbyterian Village Harbor East, 33875 Kiely Drive in Chesterfield Township.

Contact **MELANIE D. SCOTT** at 248-351-3681 or mdscott@freepress.com.

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April 4; 1:30 p.m. April 11.

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Event: Book discussion of "Arc of Justice," 7 p.m. March 26

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