

1971 uprising shaped Attica prosecutor's life

Malcolm Bell's new book uses fiction to recall era

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Rochester Democrat and Chronicle
USA TODAY NETWORK

Lawyer Malcolm Bell was tasked with the prosecution of state police and others who may have committed crimes, including murder, during the violent and deadly retaking of Attica prison on Sept. 13, 1971.

In all, 43 people — 32 inmates and 11 prison employees — died at Attica, the nation's deadliest prison uprising.

It was a seminal experience in his life, and the fascinating, difficult era is reflected in ways he approached his new book, "Roses in the Night."



Bell

The book from Fresh Look Press is fiction, yet steeped in fact from his own life experiences helping refugees fleeing from Guatemala during the country's civil war. Risking prosecution, Bell harbored undocumented refugees who had their entire villages destroyed by the country's armies and relatives slaughtered.

"Roses in the Night" focuses on sisters, one who tries to save her village and another raped and tortured by U.S.-backed intelligence officers in El Salvador. The characters are modeled after individuals Bell met in the Sanctuary Movement, which helped refugees escaping Central America.

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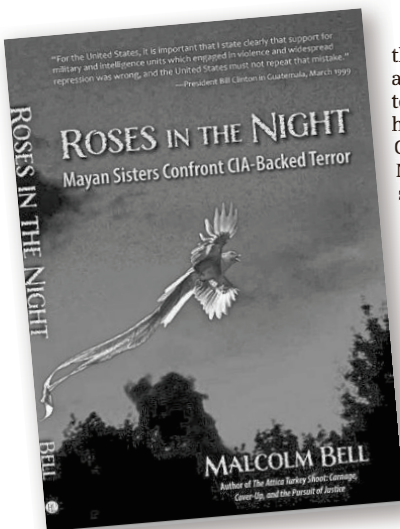
The Attica prosecution

Bell, now 93, said the Attica uprising rerouted the direction of his life.

He became more distrustful of government — Bell has contended that his prosecution of police at Attica was purposefully undermined — and government claims. Attica again comes to the fore: Some officials at first said that incarcerated men killed hostages during the police seizure of the prison when in-



Members of the CERT, Correctional Emergency Response Team, from all over the state march in front of Attica Correctional Facility as part of the ceremony for the Forgotten Victims of Attica memorial in front of Attica Correctional Facility on Sept. 13, 2021. On that date in 1971, New York State Police retook the prison after inmates took control of a portion of the prison, D-Yard, holding hostages. Forty-three people died during the retaking and one correctional officer, William Quinn, died Sept. 11, 1971, as a result of being beaten during the prison uprising. CERT was created in response to the Attica riot. TINA MACINTYRE-YEE/ROCHESTER DEMOCRAT AND CHRONICLE



Malcolm Bell's "Roses in the Night" PROVIDED BY MALCOLM BELL

stead they were killed by police gunfire. There is a nexus between the movement to help Guatemalan refugees, and

the civil war that prompted their flight, and the Attica uprising, Bell said in a telephone interview from his Vermont home. The government, whether the CIA support with Guatemala's armies or New York officials approving the assault on Attica, destroyed lives. And, the government typically absolves itself.

Oftentimes, Bell said, the public is complicit, accepting spoon-fed government rationales.

"You've got this thing that was true with Attica and was true with the Sanctuary Movement," he said. "Most people are aggressively ignorant. They don't want to know about the stuff that might cause them to have to do something."

Bell's earlier book, "The Turkey Shoot," detailed his work on Attica and the roadblocks he encountered. Since its initial release in 1985, and subsequent updates with new information, more details have been unearthed that support Bell's beliefs that New York officials did not want police prosecuted.

For instance Heather Thompson's

Pulitzer-winning "Blood in the Water: The Attica Prison Uprising of 1971 and Its Legacy" relied in part on records from a grand jury investigating police that had never been publicly released. Thompson obtained those records and her book bolsters Bell's claims.

Bell now spends much time caring for his wife, Nancy, who has dementia. Through the decades of marriage, Bell said, she has been a rock of support, backing him at times, such as when sheltering refugees, when he risked his own prosecution.

"Very few women, I think, would have put up with what I did in the Sanctuary Movement. A lot of women might have said, 'Don't break the law; you might go to jail.'"

Bell has always longed to write, he said, and "The Turkey Shoot" was his first venture into publishing. He still plans more, he said.

Annual Attica ceremony

This year, as every recent year, there will be a Sept. 13 ceremony at the Attica prison honoring the prison employees killed during the uprising and retaking. Elsewhere in the state, there are often events remembering the incarcerated men who were killed.

The public ceremony at the Attica Correctional Facility will begin at 4:30 p.m. It is organized by the Forgotten Victims of Attica, an organization of prison workers who were at the riot and the families of those who were killed at the uprising or have died in the years since.

Bell cannot attend this year; he has numerous times in the past. He has been welcomed by Forgotten Victims, considered a whistleblowing hero by many in its ranks.

One day in the future he hopes to return, he said. In the meantime, he will continue to write.

Gary Craig is a veteran reporter at the Democrat and Chronicle who has extensively covered the aftermath of the Attica uprising. He is the co-author of "The Prison Guard's Daughter: My Journey Through the Ashes of Attica," the memoir of Deanne Quinn Miller. Miller's father, a corrections officer at Attica was fatally beaten by inmates during the uprising. She is a founding member of Forgotten Victims of Attica.