

Among the dead

Arkansans died at Jonestown in 1978

OPINION

PRESTON JONES

SPECIAL TO THE DEMOCRAT-GAZETTE

Forty-three years ago today, when Arkansans were getting ready for bed or preparing for night shift, more than 900 fellow Americans lay dead around a pavilion in Jonestown, Guyana. Others were lost in Georgetown, the country's capital.

American special forces at Howard Air Force Base in Panama scrambled. The first U.S. serviceman to set foot in Jonestown was David Netterville, who lives near Oklahoma City. He assumed he was going into a gunfight to rescue survivors of a massacre. Helicopters flew over the jungle surrounding Jonestown calling for the living to come out. None did.

News reports said 200 people had died in Jonestown. Then 500. But there were bodies on bodies. Every military veteran who went to Jonestown remembers the babies and small children. Many of these are buried in a common grave in Oakland, Calif. To speak with the fathers of some of these children is to sense a minuscule fraction of a pain that endures.

Soon the airwaves carried words from people who knew nothing but posed as experts. We heard about mind control and cults and charismatic evil-doers. Yes, Jim Jones was evil. Yes, Jonestown appears to have been a kind of mini-North Korea, with propaganda frequently screeched from loudspeakers. Yes, Peoples Temple, which began as an unorthodox Christian movement, had become a radical political cult.

But all this prevented us from seeing the most basic thing: that the more than 900 people who died at Jonestown and Georgetown — some by suicide, some by murder — were ordinary people. A detailed report recently released by the Jonestown Institute shows that several dozen had ties to Arkansas.

As the tragedy at Jonestown unfolded, two people wrote letters to those who would come after. One was penned by a young woman named Annie Moore. She was in Jim Jones' inner circle and was the only one aside from Jones to die of a gunshot wound. She may have been the last in Jonestown to die.

So we think she must have been crazy. But read her letter. She was confused, but not crazy. She was idealistic. She was full of hope. She was full of bitterness at a world that stole her hope. Like most of us, she longed for Eden. She felt the frustration of wanting heaven in a world that can't supply it. She wasn't crazy. What happened at Jonestown would be easier to understand if she were.

A few weeks ago, a letter-writer to the Democrat-Gazette took a shot at a political opponent with a reference to Kool-Aid. Putting aside the trivial fact that the cyanide at Jonestown was actually mixed with less expensive Flavor-Aid, to say that a rival has "drunk the Kool-Aid" is to raise the untrue specter of mindless automatons at Jonestown.



Guest writer

From the right, Fox News host Tucker Carlson has said that Biden supporters are creating new Jonestowns. Progressive congresswoman Jackie Speier has said the same in reverse, though she, especially, should know better. In 1978, Speier was an aide to Congressman Leo Ryan, who was murdered near Jonestown. She herself was shot multiple times by one of the few at Jonestown who truly can be called perpetrators.

"Despite what happened at Jonestown, it was beautiful." I've heard this enough from people who spent time there — who lost loved ones there — to know that it must be true. These say that when Jim Jones wasn't present, Jonestown was wonderful. Military veterans who went there still marvel at a community hewed from the jungle.

Yet, to say that Jonestown was beautiful is obviously incomprehensible — as incomprehensible as the human condition itself. At the center of the Jonestown tragedy is a deep, heartbreaking mystery. It's a human mystery. And the humans have names.

Bernell Hines of Little Rock was a carpenter and welder at Jonestown. Mattie Gibson of Blevins sorted rice. Georgia Catney of Dexter was a cook and housekeeper. Annie Harris of Caledonia helped with farming. Willie Grady of Wynne taught in the Jonestown school. Lucioes Bryant of Waldo was a painter, plumber and heavy-equipment operator. Lenora Perkins of Warren worked in the baby nursery. Charlene Rochelle of Crossett was a dental assistant. Dessie Jordan of Hermitage worked with the children and the elderly. Glenda Polite of Texarkana did secretarial work. Gabriel Thomas of Monroe helped with electronics. In all, more than 40 Americans with roots in Arkansas died at Jonestown.

As the years have gone by, Jim Jones has become uninteresting to me. I want to know the stories of Charlene and Lucioes and Willie. Among the great gifts I've received are the stories of Peoples Temple and Jonestown survivors who were willing to speak with me.

Our fellow Americans — our fellow Arkansans — who died at Jonestown 43 years ago weren't oddities. They were people like you and me, with the hopes and dreams and hungers and anguishes and disappointments and longings for things this mad world can't fully supply.

Preston Jones oversees the website "Military Response to Jonestown" (militaryresponsetojonestown.com) as well as "War & Life: Discussions with Veterans" (warandlifediscussions.weebly.com). Email him at pjones@jbu.edu.