Badges of Honor

When I was a teenager, my mom showed me her grandfather's Civil War service badge. Imprinted on it is his name, H. Reddinger, and the Union Army unit in which he served, Company B, 6th Pennsylvania Heavy Artillery.

In the 1860 presidential election, Abraham Lincoln and his anti-slavery platform were victorious in Pennsylvania. In Western Pennsylvania, where my mom's family lived and farmed, the vote was decisively against extending slavery into new U.S. territories, the main slavery issue in the election.

After the Confederate attack on Fort Sumter in the Spring of 1861, President Lincoln called for volunteers for the Union Army, and my great-grandfather's older brother John, age 22, signed up for the 105th Pennsylvania Infantry Regiment. He was captured by the Confederates, and interned in Andersonville Prison, the terrible Georgia camp for Union soldiers.

The anti-slavery families in their community believed they each should have a son in the war, so in 1864, at age 18, my great-grandfather Henry volunteered to replace his brother. His regiment helped to defend Washington, D.C. from Confederate attack, especially guarding the rail lines coming through Virginia from the South.

My mother explained to me that her family had stood against slavery, and she let me know that it was important to uphold equity and racial justice. Inspired by my ancestors' stand in the Civil War, I have found in the ensuing decades that the needs to advocate for civil rights and racial justice are everywhere around us.

My first opportunity came when I was 18 and planned to visit Southern Africa. As I began to inform myself about the region, I was shocked to learn about apartheid in South Africa, and the near-apartheid of Rhodesia, now Zimbabwe, the country in which I would mainly spend time.

A white-run British colony that declared independence in 1965 rather than yield to British demands for majority rule, Rhodesia was denied diplomatic recognition by every country in the world except South Africa. The UN sanctioned trade with Rhodesia, in an effort to economically isolate the country to change its racist policies.

As a freshman in college, I worked with an African studies professor and a psychologist on our faculty to design an independent study where I would interview white officials, African nationalists and others about the prospect for majority rule in Rhodesia. I was stunned by what I saw there in the spring of 1972, a society in which a quarter-million whites subjugated five and a half million Blacks, who had no right to vote. Segregation was widespread, spending on education for the Black majority was minuscule and Black Africans were prohibited from owning land throughout most of the country.

The economic sanctions were flagrantly violated by countries, including Japan, Germany and France, whose companies bought Rhodesia's tobacco crops and supplied ample goods for the white minority.

I reported what I saw in a series of articles in my college newspaper. After portraying the racism and illogic of the white attitudes, I ended my articles noting that holding onto views such as these had led to violent overthrow of white governments elsewhere in Africa. I observed that the white government's resistance to change could bring the same result in Rhodesia.

Three years later, one of my main sources, pioneering Rhodesian Black barrister and African National Congress activist Edson Sithole, was abducted and presumably killed. A year after that, guerrilla warfare intensified between Black freedom fighters and the white government. In the end, more than 20,000 civilians, 1,200 government troops, and 10,000 guerrillas died, and the Rhodesian government resorted to chemical and biological weapons against the guerrillas.

Majority rule finally came in 1979, and the Republic of Zimbabwe was born in 1980. Much of this could have been prevented if the white Rhodesians had embraced racial justice in their society.

The formalized racism practiced in America until the Civil War, which continued until the 1964 Civil Rights Act and beyond, and in Southern Africa through the early 1990s, has technically ended.

But discrimination, racism and civil rights violations are all around us, every day.

I wrote last year about an African-American former member of the Club’s board, former KGO radio talk show host Ray Taliaferro, who suffered from dementia and went missing at age 79 on a winter-time trip to Kentucky. The white sheriff there dismissed concerns about him and did not quickly do a thorough search, and Ray was found dead after spending the night outdoors in the freezing weather. This seemed to me a case where a Black life didn’t sufficiently matter in today’s American South.

Whether near or far, dramatic or subtle, each of us has the opportunity and obligation every day to take stands for civil rights, racial justice and equity. That is what our ancestors fought for, and what is honorable and right.