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Exonerated!

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By **STEPHEN HUDAK**
Orlando Sentinel

A judge Monday restored the constitutional right to “presumption of innocence: for the Groveland Four, granting a prosecutor’s motion to throw out indictments and convictions that ruined the lives of four Black men accused seven decades ago of raping a 17-year-old white girl.

Calling it an “unimaginable privilege,” Circuit Judge Heidi Davis cleared the names of Charles Greenlee, Walter Irvin, Samuel Shepherd and Ernest Thomas, all now dead, to correct one of Florida’s greatest miscarriages of justice from the Jim Crow era.

“This is a glory hallelujah day,” said Shepherd’s cousin, Beverly Robinson, at a news conference afterward.

The judge’s decision was met with applause from two courtrooms full of observers — one group watching in person, one watching a live-stream of the hearing. Carol Greenlee, daughter of Charles Greenlee, wept and fell into the arms of family members outside the courtroom.

“All my life I’ve felt as if a cloud hung over me,” she said later. “It’s gone now. I’m not a rapist’s daughter.”

Eddie Irvin, 59, nephew of Walter Irvin, said his joy was tempered because his uncle and other relatives,



(From left) Then-Lake County Sheriff Willis McCall (and an unidentified individual) looks on Walter Irvin, Charles Greenlee and Samuel Shepherd, three of the Groveland Four men who were accused of raping a 17-year-old white female. The fourth man, Ernest Thomas, fled, only to be found by a posse that killed him, shooting him approximately 400 times. The four men accused were exonerated Nov. 22.

especially his grandmother, were not alive to hear a judge declare that Walter was an innocent man — a fact which they never, ever doubted.

Irvin also said two of the families have one more fight looming. He said both his uncle and Samuel Shepherd were dishonorably discharged from the U.S.

Army because of the false rape accusation, and the families hope to see that corrected, too.

The men ranged in age from 16 to 26 in 1949 when they were accused of raping Norma Lee Padgett.

Greenlee at 16 was the youngest.

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