A month before the trial commenced, Cobb's wife told the Call & Post, during a two hour interview, the criticism leveled against them since their marriage in 1949, "may have changed his racial feelings a lot. I think they taught him a lot of hatred that he might not have had otherwise."

By Ryan Miday

Contributing Writer

Emmett "Tonelli" Cobb would have turned 90-years-old on December 24th. He died unnoticed on Oct. 22, 1999, in a state hospital for the criminally insane. He spent nearly all of the 45 years there since his trial; one of Cleveland's most sensational, in 1954. But his legacy remains. He was a pioneer in Cleveland for what would become a national wave of Black power movements in the 1960s. He did it on his own terms, and he paid the ultimate price: his freedom.

White Slavery:

On April 12, 1954, Cobb, 32, aka Ahmed El aka the Prophet was indicted by a Cuyahoga County grand jury on "morals" charges. Ralph "Smitty" Smith, 27, and Dr. Samuel Braun, 65, a white doctor, were indicted as co-defendants.

Cobb was accused of luring women into prostitution. Among the witnesses that testified before the grand jury were two White women, a 19-year-old Shaker Heights heiress and a 30-year-old Westside housewife, along with an 18-year-old Black woman from the Central Avenue area. Other witnesses reportedly testified that he used hypnosis to lure women into the life. He was also accused of operating a crime school, educating call girls on pigeon drop confidence games, boosting, and prostitution. The most serious of the accusations against Cobb was that he had sex with the Black woman three years earlier, in 1951, when she was 15-years-old.

Co-defendant Ralph Smith was accused of violating Ohio's white slavery laws, which stemmed from the federal White Slave Traffic Act. In 1910, Congress passed the Act to preserve society's morals by protecting White women from the influx of immigrants who were supposedly transporting them across state-lines and subjecting them to sinful sexual activity.

The federal White Slavery law is best known for its use against celebrities like Chuck Berry and Jack Johnson, the heavy weight boxing champion. Johnson was charged in 1913 for travelling across state-lines with a prostitute, whom turned out to be his White girlfriend. Co-defendant Smith, according to the charges, drove the two White women, who testified before the grand jury, to Pennsylvania to engage in prostitution. In connection with the Cobb investigation, the doctor from University Heights was accused of performing an abortion on a 23-year-old woman in 1952.

Cleveland became enraptured by Cobb's "morals" case. During his trial, which started in May 1954, the judge ordered a sheriff deputy to stand at the door of the court room. People wanted a glimpse of Cobb. The daily line of spectators outnumbered the 50 seats available. The lines were sometimes three deep.

The slender, 6'2, handsome, bearded, Black man defied convention. He was a Muslim and

wore a red fez or tarboosh, as it was called, with a swigging tassel. He was a vegetarian, didn't smoke, drink, or do drugs, and married a White woman.

He had a doctorate degree in metaphysical science from Neotarian Institute of Philosophy in Kansas City
and studied constitutional law of the Zodiac under revered teacher C. M. Bey, a Moorish mathematician and eventual author of Clock of Destiny, who had a storefront on
E. 89th
St.
and
Cedar Avenue
. Cobb also studied at the
Institute
of
Applied Hypnology
in
New York City
. His studies generated intrigue and skepticism but mostly fear, as was the case when a police officer told to a Plain Dealer reporter, before trial, that he feared Cobb would hypnotize the jury.

Young lawyers loitered the halls of the courthouse. They had hoped that Cobb would change his mind about representing himself, causing the judge to appoint them as counsel. Cobb's fellow Moor and teacher, C. M. Bey, was in attendance. The trial was unexpectedly short. But the drama that unfolded would leave a lasting, strong reaction in the public's consciousness about the name "Tonelli."

More than his unconventional character, Cobb was known for standing up to charges of assaulting an off-duty police officer near E. 105th Street and Euclid Avenue, in June 1950. Refusing to plead guilty, he and his attorneys, Moses H. Dixon and Jay B. White, took the case to trial, claiming self defense. The judge found Cobb not guilty – an unprecedented verdict for such a case – and declared from the bench that, "both the police officer and the prosecutor got a hold of something too hot to handle."

The media coverage of Cobb's "morals" case was extensive. The Call & Post, Cleveland News, Cleveland Plain Dealer, and the Cleveland Press covered every aspect of his arrest, indictment, trial, and sentencing. The news of Cobb's indictment made the Plain Dealer's front page on April 13, 1954, which was entitled, "Indicts 'Prophet' in Morals Case."

Even before trial got underway, Cobb's case garnered national attention. Several days before jury selection started, he refused to take off his fez during a pre-trial hearing. He told the judge he was a nationalist and a Moorish American of the Islamic faith, before such designations gained currency and acceptance.

Emmett Cobb Becomes Tonelli:

John Drake was Cobb's closest friend. In reminiscing about his old friend, Drake, who maintains a daily reading of the Koran and the Bible at 80-years-old, as he cares for his 96-year-old mother, said with a big smile that he met Cobb in the 1940s at a dance. Cobb was a regular at dances around town doing the jitterbug. "He thought he could dance and I challenged him," said Drake. "He (Cobb) laughed, when I started to tap dance; you see, I was taking tap dancing classes at the time."

Drake, ten years younger, latched onto to Cobb, whose personality radiated pride and energy. Tonelli, in turn, surely was aware that Johnny Drake was the son of Arthur "Little Brother" Drake, one of the biggest numbers operators in Cleveland's history; and the son of Catherine Drake, the owner of the Café Tia Juana on the corner of E. 105th Street and Massie Avenue, which was once known in the late 1940s as the plushiest café in the Midwest.

Almost every day, driving his mother's Oldsmobile 98, Drake would pick up Cobb, who, like most people, didn't have a car. He would pick him up at one of Cobb's favorite hang-outs, Lam's Chinese Restaurant on Cedar Avenue near E. 97th Street. Drake recalls spending many a day and night together with Cobb, just hanging out and having fun, until Cobb was confined in 1954.

The development of Cobb's worldview paralleled, in many ways, that of Malcolm X's. Their experience of racism's soul-rotting effects while growing up led to an ironclad resolve to challenge the status quo. To understand Cobb, Drake emphasized, one needs to understand what the Ku Klux Klan did to his mother.

Cobb was born in Alabama in 1921. Details of his upbringing and his mother's death are not fully known. June V. Williams of the Call & Post profiled his sister's relentless but unsuccessful

effort to get Cobb out of the insane asylum. What is known, from his sister and people interviewed for this article, is that his mother was murdered by the Ku Klux Klan.
Drake remembers Cobb telling him how his mother suffered a ruthless death in 1926. The Ku Klux Klan tied a rope around her head and hair. They tied the rope to a horse and stood by as it dragged her until she died. Unconfirmed accounts suggest that Cobb's father, in protecting his family, killed one or more Klansmen. Terrified of the repercussions, the family fled the state.

Growing up, Cobb was a precocious student. He was far ahead of his Central High School classmates, where he graduated. By all accounts, he was gifted and had a high IQ. Call & Post's Woody Taylor reported, in April 1954, that "an old acquaintance of his [Tonelli] remembered that during Tonelli's high school days he had a fertile mind and was the envy of his classmates because he could cite classical and poetic masterpieces verbatim, with flawless diction and with the greatest of ease."

In his senior year in 1941, Cobb participated in Central's Question Mark Club, whose purpose was to study "Negro Life." Years later, Drake and Cobb often went downtown to the three-story bookstore called Kay's at 620 Prospect Avenue near E. 6th Street, where Tonelli would buy stacks of books. "He could read a book and recite a passage from any page," Drake said. "He had a photographic memory."

To go along with his superior intellect was an attitude, a deadly combination that left him restless as a teenager. He got into enough fights with the Italians to earn him the nickname Tonelli. His reputation turned infamous around the Cedar Avenue area, acquiring a bad boy image and the label of "dead end kid" from leading his high school friends in the Gunga Din Gang.

People's reputations often become stretched, especially the self-assured ones, and Cobb's was no different. It oversimplified the truth about a man with conflicting identities. His venomous attitude toward authority masked a jovial nature. He was voted most popular by the Gay Associates at an event, in 1947, held at the Paradise Auditorium. He was an avid roller skater at the Pla-Mor, and he enjoyed theater at the Karamu House.

He was into jazz, too. As reported by Raoul Abdul of the Call & Post, during a Josephine Baker performance at the RKO Palace Theatre, he joined her in an "entertaining by-play across the footlights" after she spotted him in the front row and both exchanged Islamic greetings.

When Cobb wasn't with Drake, he could be found walking the neighborhood of Cedar Avenue and E. 97th Street. He incessantly talked, and he talked to everybody. He always stopped the kids, handing out dollar bills and empowering them to learn the true nature of the Black man. Drake's friend since Audubon junior high school, 78-year-old Roy Strickland, grew up on E. 106th St. and Cedar Avenue. Strickland remembers being young, around 12 to 13-years-old, and knowing of Cobb. "A lot of people looked up to him," Strickland said. "He was no trouble maker but when trouble found him, he didn't run away." Strickland described Cobb as the type of guy who was for the underdog. "If you had a problem with somebody or somebody jumped on you, he would come to your side. That's the way he was."

If Tonelli had a singular passion it was the pursuit of knowledge. Drake stood up during one of our interviews in his living room, pointing to his wrists and ankles, to drive home what Cobb was unmasking: the nature of slavery had merely changed from the physical chains to chains around the mind through the indoctrination of white supremacy rhetoric. "Tonelli understood this," Drake proclaimed. "Knowledge was power to him, and he wanted to dominate. He wanted freedom."

This passion for learning coincided with the occult movement in the 1940s and 1950s. Ernest Turner, a civil rights activist in the 1960s and retired Cleveland Public School teacher after 30-years, explained that Blacks began questioning what it meant to be Black in America. Traditional teachings were devoid of answers, so Blacks began seeking out nontraditional sources. Cobb began learning Moorish law from C. M. Bey and eventually became a Muslim, acquiring the name, Brother Ahmed El.

Cobb was also passionate about women. His association with pretty, upscale White women was widely known: he sought them and they sought him. Harboring a belligerent and prideful attitude that he could have what the White man desired, Cobb bragged about having many White women. Even though he didn't drink alcohol, Cobb regularly patronized the Gold Coast, the famous entertainment area of E. 105th and Euclid Avenue. His magnetic personality attracted

women from all over Cleveland and its suburbs. One of the women in Cobb's criminal case, the Shaker Heights heiress, admitted to being a former mistress. She testified at trial that she had met him at the Towne Casino, a prominent jazz club located on Euclid Avenue between E. 105th and E. 107th Streets.

Opening in 1951, the Towne Casino became a hot national jazz scene, attracting stars such as Count Bessie and Sarah Vaughn. It also attracted a mixed racial crowd. Six months before it closed on August 1, 1953, Duke Ellington and the All Stars jammed out to 400 people. That night was the first of a string of bombs detonated at the club because of its interracial crowd. The Casino held out after the first two bombs but capitulated after the third, writing on the outside marquee, "Don't Bomb Us. We Quit."
Unsurprisingly, Cobb's marriage to a White woman engendered considerable consternation. His resentment at the White man for what they did to his mother was amplified by their reaction to his marriage. When White men would come into the neighborhood people showed respect, but not Cobb. Drake exclaimed, "He gave them no air; he jumped all over them, immediately interrogating them, and Tonelli could get loud."

A month before the trial commenced, Cobb's wife told the Call & Post, during a two hour interview, the criticism leveled against them since their marriage in 1949, "may have changed his racial feelings a lot. I think they taught him a lot of hatred that he might not have had otherwise." Although Ohio struck down its anti-miscegenation law in 1887, it was taboo, an unwritten law. It wasn't until 1967 that the US Supreme Court ruled against the remaining 16 states with anti-miscegenation laws. Alabama, Cobb's birth state, was the last state to remove the law from its books, in 2000.

As much admiration as Cobb generated, there was equally as much disdain for what he represented as a Muslim Black nationalist of the streets. Published in the Call & Post, Mrs. Marva Stein of Alcazar Hotel represented this wide-spread sentiment, especially in the White community, that morals were being attacked.

Mrs. Stein was incensed over the Call & Post's coverage of Cobb's trial, writing that she

anticipated reading about the Philharmonic Glee Club’s Sunday performance at the Euclid Avenue Baptist Church
. Instead, she found front page reporting on “terrible Tonelli and his vicious and vulgar antics… and the first page of second section dominated by ‘leggy’ models at a dance.”

**Editor’s Note: Look for Part 2 of the Tonelli story next week in the Call & Post Newspaper. The remainder of this amazing story concludes with the unforgettable drama taking place at his trial and its outcome, as well as Tonelli’s legacy on the dawning of Cleveland’s Black Nationalist movement.*

Read Part II