When the delegation arrived in town they were welcomed by the City of Marks’ Mayor Joe Shegog Jr., and Samuel McClay, the retired field representative of Congressman Bennie Thompson, who currently serves as the vice-chair of the Mule Train Historical Society. Shegog and McClay served as the tour guides. The delegation visited the Mule Train Civil Rights Freedom Trail Marker and the eleven historic sites that mark the 1968 Mule Train Trail as well as several other sites of historical significance. “There’s a lot of history in Marks,” said Shegog. Following the tour, the group gathered at the Quitman County Middle School gym for a panel discussion moderated by Dr. Hilliard Lackey, Jackson State University professor and published author of the 1998 definitive history of the events of 1968, “Marks, Martin and the Mule Train.”

The panel consisted of local residents who actively took part in, or witnessed the historic civil rights activities in Marks during 1968. After an opening invocation by the Rev. Michael Jossell, Sr., pastor of the Mount Zion Baptist Church and Manuel Killebrew, current Quitman County Board of Supervisors president, who shared that he was there when the Mule Train rolled into Washington, DC and that he took part in helping with the construction of Tent City on the Mall in Washington, DC in 1968. Dr. Valmudge Towner, president of Coahoma Community College, participated in the panel discussion. He said that he appreciated the invitation to participate in the forum and that it is important for the local leaders of Quitman County to keep the storied history of the civil rights struggle alive. “This forum, allowed persons like me to actually hear firsthand accounts from persons who witnessed and or participated in the Mule Train experience,” said Towner. He also indicated that the nationwide civil rights education delegation visit to Marks is a testament to the importance of Quitman County’s contribution to the civil rights struggle in the 1960s. Towner is hopeful that this event and discussion will ignite a desire for younger people to learn more about their community’s past, so that they can authentically and deeply appreciate the amenities that we enjoy today.

Wilson emphasized the necessity for collaborative partnerships and private investors to help push forth the initiatives in which the City of Marks and the Quitman County Board of Supervisors have invested. These initiatives, according to Wilson, include the newly constructed Amtrak station and the first phase of the construction of a safe neighborhood playground. Also included is the beginning phase of the opening of a job and career training center, and the opening of a county-wide Interactive Center. These initiatives involve placing a priority on tourism by supporting the annual Mules & Blues Festival and the beginning stage of downtown revitalization as a result of the efforts of the Reclaimed Project that renovated an older building on Main Street which now provides free housing for teachers. Killebrew hopes these initiatives and investments by the local stakeholders will attract businesses or companies that will locate in Quitman County. He further stated, “jobs would certainly help remedy the problem of our declining population, improve the overall living conditions of the citizens, increase the tax revenues to invest more in education, housing, roads and bridges.”

Lackey said at the end of the program, “It was so gratifying to know that these academicians thought Marks was the highlight of this civil rights tour of the places they visited in the south. This implies that Marks can become a historic destination, which of course is our dream.”

Zepp Center co-founders Drs. Charles Collyer and Pamela Zappardino have helped sponsor historical and educational tours since January 1997. Collyer and Zappardino said they were excited about the visit and the opportunities. Kevin Dayhoff was on the tour. He writes history for the Baltimore Sun Media Group. He is a retired farmer, the former mayor of Westminster, MD., and the current secretary of the local Carroll County, MD NAACP branch. He said of the tour and panel discussion, “The purpose of studying history is not to go back to the past, but to bring the past to the present and use it to help shape the future.”

Charles Alphin, Sr., the director and CEO of DDK Historical and Educational Tours, which facilitated the visit, has been working with the King Center in Atlanta and guiding historic tours since the 1980s. He said after the visit, “If you do not know where you come from, you don’t know where you are going.”

For more information about Quitman County, please visit our website at: www.quitmancountyms.org

**Photographs courtesy of Kevin Dayhoff

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