

THE LAST LYNCHING IN ATHENS

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It happened the evening of Wednesday, Feb. 16, 1921. It began in downtown Athens when a mob forcibly attacked the Athens courthouse, and ended less than two hours later when the prisoner seized by that mob was burnt alive six miles away in an adjoining county. It was the most tragic event in the history of Clarke county. It was the last lynching in Athens.

MURDERER SUSPECT OF MRS. LEE BURNED AT THE STAKE, The Athens Banner front page headline proclaimed the next day.

“Never before in this history of this city,” the Banner story began, “has there been such a scene as was witnessed early last night at the county courthouse ...”

MOB RAIDS JAIL AND BURNS NEGRO AT CRIME SCENE, the front page headline announced in The Atlanta Constitution.

The Constitution story began: “Chained to a tree, with blazing piles of wood heaped high about him, as a crowd of more than 3,000 men surged around, John Lee Eberhart, a negro, ... was burned to death ... in Oconee county.”

The history of lynchings in America in the 19th and 20th centuries is a sad commentary on lawlessness and racism in the South. From 1882 (when statistics were first kept) until 1930 (when lynchings began a rapid decline), 4,697 persons were lynching victims in the United States, with 3,943, or 84%, of the victims lynched in Southern states. Furthermore, 3,220, or 82%, of the victims lynched in the South during this era were blacks.

This means, incredibly, that over a period of nearly fifty years the average number of blacks lynched in the South was one per week.

These statistics, astonishing as they are, do not provide a full picture of the ugliness of mob violence since they do not include unreported lynchings or prevented or attempted lynchings; nor they include episodes where the victim was tortured, whipped, or beaten, but not actually killed.

In Georgia there were 381 lynching incidents between 1882 and 1930, with a total of 458 victims, of whom 435, or 95%, were black. Thus, during this

period on average one black person was lynched in Georgia every 40 days. The only Southern state with more lynchings during this period was Mississippi, with 538 victims (of whom 509, or 95%, were black).

If lynchings were not infrequent in Georgia, they were rare in Clarke county. The burning of John Lee Eberhart in 1921 is the only recorded lynching in Athens since lynching statistics began, and it is unlikely there have been any unrecorded lynchings here since 1882. The Eberhart case is therefore not only the last lynching in Athens; it may have been the only lynching in Athens.

The possibility remains that there were lynchings in Athens before 1882--for example, during Reconstruction, when local whites resisted Northern efforts to assist the freedmen.

The most terrible tragedy in the history of Athens arose out of a brutal murder that occurred not in Clarke county but in Oconee county, shortly after 8:00 on the morning of Feb. 16, 1921. Mrs. Ida D. Lee, 25, wife of prominent Oconee county farmer Walter M. Lee, 31, had just left her house to milk and feed the cows in the barn when she was killed instantly by two shotgun blasts fired from behind.

Newspapers reported that “[n]ews of the deed spread rapidly and hundreds of citizens from Clarke and Oconee counties joined the officers in search of the murderer.”

John Lee Eberhart, a young black man who worked for the Lee family and allegedly had recently stolen a gun from Mr. Lee, was immediately suspected of the crime. Authorities went to Eberhart’s home but he was not there. It was then learned that Eberhart had probably gone to Athens where he had a friend who worked at the Lambda Chi Alpha fraternity house. Police, accompanied by Eberhart’s father, went to the fraternity, but Eberhart was not there. Later, at about 2:00 p.m., Eberhart’s friend called police and told them that Eberhart was at the fraternity and wanted to surrender. Eberhart was arrested there with a gun in his possession belonging to Mr. Lee. For his own protection Eberhart was not returned to Oconee county but instead placed in the custody of Clarke county sheriff Walter E. Jackson and lodged in the Clarke county jail, on the top floor of the present courthouse on Washington street.

According to newspaper accounts, Eberhart, who supposedly was “well-known as a criminal character to the officers of Clarke county,” admitted killing Mrs. Lee, making a “clean-cut confession to Sheriff Jackson.”

During the late afternoon and early evening hundreds of people from Clarke, Oconee, Oglethorpe, and Jackson counties began to gather around the courthouse, arriving by automobile, on horseback, or on foot. By 8:00 p.m. the courthouse was surrounded by a crowd of 3,000 people, most of whom were, according to a Clarke grand jury report filed a week later, merely “idly curious” and “innocent spectators.” The only law enforcement officer inside was Sheriff Jackson, who had taken the precaution of sending away the keys to the jail.

The trouble began shortly after 8:00 p.m. when, according to the grand jury report, “a group of men came to the courthouse in automobiles and made their way through the mass of people” encircling the courthouse. These men forced their way into the lobby of the courthouse by smashing the plate glass windows and breaking down the front doors. Using the elevator and a narrow stairwell they ascended to the jail floor. They immediately proceeded to attack the jail at two separate points, with an acetylene torch being used at one point of attack, and sledgehammers and chisels being used at the other. Sheriff Jackson, endeavoring to defend his prisoner, actually wrested away the acetylene torch and blocked entry into the jail at that point. While he was so occupied, however, the other attack team burst into the jail and seized the terrified Eberhart, who was chained, dragged downstairs, hustled out the back entrance, and placed in an automobile which then sped off.

Eberhart was driven to a wooded area near the place where Mrs. Lee had been murdered that morning. In the presence of a huge menacing mob which had quickly assembled he was chained to a tree and wood and kindling piled around him. During the next hour the mob carefully organized itself and conducted a sort of sham trial, even choosing prosecutors and judges.

Before the pyre was lighted, Eberhart was told he would not be harmed until he had been given an opportunity to confess his guilt. Eberhart, however, denied his guilt.

The scene that followed newspaper accounts call “one of the most horrible in the history of the state.”

The Constitution reported: “The torch was applied and as the flames began to leap high into the air the leaders of the crowd in charge of the work asked him time and time again for a statement as to his guilt, and each time his reply was that he was innocent. The torch was applied about 9:30 o'clock and shortly after the flames had enveloped his body. The crowd then slowly and quietly disappeared.”

The next day the Oconee county coroner held an inquest over the remains of Eberhart. The coroner's jury was coldly unsympathetic to Eberhart, reporting that he "came to his death at the hands of unknown citizens, and that he was guilty of committing the murder of Mrs. Lee."

Both University of Georgia president David C. Barrow and Clarke superior court judge Andrew Cobb publicly castigated the lynching and the lynchers. Numerous Athenians sent letters to the governor complaining that Eberhart had received insufficient protection and pointing out that the lynchers were not from Clarke county. The Athens Ministerial Association denounced the lynching as "barbarism" and "subversive of every interest we hold precious." However, despite investigations and reward offers, not a single member of the mob was ever prosecuted.

Ida D. Lee and Walter M. Lee (who died in 1974) are buried in a family plot in the Union Christian Church cemetery, behind the new Oconee county high school.

The small white clapboard house in which they lived and outside which Ida was slain still stands. (It remains privately owned, and the privacy of its occupants should be respected.) Athenians who want to see the house may do so by simply by driving south on the Macon highway. The house is in Oconee county, one mile beyond the Clarke-Oconee county line, at 8441 Macon highway. It is the third house past, and on the same side of the curving road as, the Friendship Presbyterian Church. Mrs. Lee was slain near the large oak tree on one side of the house.

John Lee Eberhart was burned in the wooded area immediately across the Macon highway from the house.