

“BLOODY INJURIES:” **THE LYNCHINGS IN OCONEE** **COUNTY, 1905-1921**

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A lynching is the murder of a person who meets his death at the hands of a group acting under the pretext of service to justice, race, or tradition. Although lynchings are often associated with what the cowboy movies call “necktie parties,” many lynching victims were not hanged but shot or beaten to death or burned alive.

The history of lynchings in the American South is a somber yet enlightening story.

Between 1882 (when lynching statistics were first kept) and 1930 (when lynchings began a rapid decline), nearly 4,700 persons were lynched in the United States, 84% of whom were lynched in the Southern states. In the 1880's 82% of all American lynchings occurred in the South; by the 1920's this percentage had risen to 95%. As W. Fitzhugh Brundage notes in his 1993 book Lynching in the New South, “If lynching was a national crime, it was also a southern obsession.”

In the South, unlike other parts of the country, most lynchings were inextricably linked with white racism and the subjugation of black people. “There can be little question,” Brundage observes, “that [Southern] lynchings were inherently ‘conservative,’ directed as they were against blacks ... [T]he mere threat of mob violence became a form of coercion that sustained the status quo in the South.”

“Lynchings [in the South] became a means of social control used to keep black people in a disadvantaged position,” says sociologist E. M. Beck.

In their analysis of Southern lynchings, A Festival of Violence (1995), Beck and another sociologist, Stewart E. Tolnay, write that: “Lynchings were more likely to occur where, and when, southern whites felt threatened in some way by their African-American neighbors. This perceived threat could arise from concerns for popular justice over offending black behavior or from the more

subtle threats of black competition for greater access to economic, political, or status resources.”

Tolnay and Beck also point out in their book that “lynching was not the only mechanism that the white population used to reduce the level of perceived race threat. Alternative measures such as disenfranchisement, legal executions, and Jim Crow laws were also employed.”

Lynching statistics confirm the intimate connection between lynchings and white racism in the South. Between 1882 and 1930, 83% of all lynching victims outside the South and Border States were white, whereas in the Southern and Border states during this period 85% of lynching victims were black. Of the nearly 4,000 persons lynched in the South between 1882 and 1930, 82% were black. The percentage of white victims of Southern lynchings declined from 32% in 1882 to 9% in 1930.

“Thus, over time, and especially after the turn of the century, lynching in the South became increasingly and exclusively a matter of white mobs murdering African-Americans,” write authors Tolnay and Beck.

Statistics also show Southern lynchings were segregated. Just as most lynching victims in the South were black, most lynch mobs were all white. Very few lynching incidents with more than one victim had both white and black victims; usually, the victims were all of one race, i.e., black.

Georgia Lynchings

Georgia was one of the leading Southern states in terms of lynchings. In Georgia there were 381 lynching incidents between 1882 and 1930, with a total of 458 victims, of whom 435, or 95%, were black. The only Southern state with more lynchings during this period was Mississippi, with 538 victims (of whom 509, or 95%, were black).

Because of progress in race relations in Georgia since the 1950's, and because there have been no lynchings in Georgia since 1946, we tend to forget how many prominent Georgians--including politicians and, especially, journalists and newspaper editors--used to defend lynching as a positive good.

In 1897 Rebecca Lattimer Felton, a writer for The Atlanta Journal, gave a speech to a Georgia agricultural society in which she said that “if it takes lynching to protect women's dearest possession from drunken, ravaging human beasts, then I say lynch a thousand a week if it becomes necessary.” Charles E.

Smith, a journalist for The Atlanta Constitution who used the nom de plume Bill Arp, wrote in a 1902 column: “As for lynching, I repeat what I have said before, let the good work go on. Lynch 'em! Shoot 'em! Hang 'em! Burn 'em!” And in 1903 the editor of a Crawfordville newspaper, responding to courageous Southern critics of lynching, asked sarcastically: “What's the use of forever apologizing for doing something that is necessary and proper?” Comments such as these received wide support in Georgia and contributed to the continued occurrence of lynchings in this state.

Lynchings in Clarke and Oconee Counties

In an article entitled “The Last Lynching in Athens,” published in the Flagpole on Sept. 10, 1997, I recounted the tragic story of the only lynching incident in Clarke County since lynching statistics began. It happened in February 1921. The victim, a black man named John Lee Eberhart, was wrested from an Athens jail by a mob and burned at the stake.

By contrast, in our sister county, Oconee County, until recently far less populous than Clarke County, there have been at least two, perhaps three, lynching incidents during the same period. At least 10 and possibly 11 persons were lynched. All the victims, except one, were black.

The first Oconee County lynching incident, on June 29, 1905, dubbed a “Carnival of Death” in newspaper accounts, was one of the worst lynching incidents in American history. At dead of night eight prisoners were taken out of jail by a masked mob, lined up before a firing squad, and shot to death. Then, twelve years later, in September 1917, there was a violent death in Oconee County which may have been a lynching. Finally, in a December 1921 lynching incident, the last in recorded history in Oconee County, two victims were lynched.

“A Most Horrible Affair”

Books on Oconee County usually omit reference to the most terrible event in the county's history, the mass lynching in downtown Watkinsville, the county seat, on June 29, 1905. Contemporary newspaper headlines reflected the nightmarish quality of these lynchings:

A WHOLESAL LYNCHING AT WATKINSVILLE TODAY.
MASKED MOB VISITS DEATH ON EIGHT PRISONERS HELD IN JAIL
AT WATKINSVILLE.
PRISONERS SHOT DOWN BY AN INSATIATE MOB.

EIGHT SLAIN BY MOB.
EIGHT MEN LYNCHED.
EIGHT MEN ARE SHOT TO DEATH BY A MOB.
WHITE MAN AND [SEVEN] NEGROES LYNCHED BY WATKINSVILLE
MOB.
SEVEN NEGROES AND ONE WHITE MAN LYNCHED.
SEVEN BLACKS AND ONE WHITE MAN BOUND AND RIDDLED WITH
BULLETS.
SEVEN NEGROES AND ONE WHITE MAN TAKEN FROM
WATKINSVILLE JAIL AND SHOT TO DEATH BY ANGRY MOB.
LYNCHING AT WATKINSVILLE.
LYNCHING IN OCONEE COUNTY.
FEELINGS ARE INTENSE OVER MOB'S MAD WORK.
SEVEN NEGROES FILL ONE GRAVE.
QUIET IS RESTORED IN WATKINSVILLE.
LYNCHING CONDEMNED IN STRONGEST TERMS.
BIG REWARDS OFFERED FOR LYNCHERS.

This lynching incident, which, in the words of a contemporary newspaper account, caused “[t]he people of Watkinsville to stand in dumb horror,” began around 2 a.m. on Thursday, June 29, 1905 when a masked mob of around 40 to 100 men in buggies or on horseback silently entered Watkinsville with military precision. They went to the house of the town marshal and forced him to accompany them to the Oconee County Jail, then located in the old brick jailhouse still standing behind the Oconee County Courthouse. They also seized a blacksmith and forced him to bring his tools and come with them to the jail. When the mob reached the jail they entered its outer doors by using the town marshal's keys. At gunpoint the mob then forced the lone jailor on duty to surrender the keys to the cells.

The mob was not there to kill any particular person; its implacable purpose was to empty the jail and slay all its inmates.

The nine helpless prisoners seized by the mob were: Lon J. Aycock, a white man awaiting trial on charges of being an accomplice to a recent notorious double murder; Claude Elder and two brothers, Lewis and Rich Robinson, awaiting trial on charges of having actually carrying out the double murder; Sandy Price, awaiting trial on a charge of attempted rape in another recent and notorious case; Rich Allen, already convicted of murder and awaiting legal execution under a judicially imposed death sentence; Bob Harris, charged with shooting at another black person; Gene Yerby, charged with stealing a rifle; and Joe Patterson, jailed on undetermined charges.

According to a story in a Savannah newspaper on the day of the lynching: “The mob opened all the cells, bringing the inmates out, and bringing them up in single file, tying them with ropes; the prisoners were marched to a corner lot in the heart of the town. They were bound to a fence with their hands tied behind them. The work was so quietly done sleeping residents of the town had not been aroused. At the command by the leader the mob stepped back a few paces, took deliberate aim, and fired a volley from the rifles, shotguns, and pistols into the line of prisoners. Every man in front of the mob fell at the first volley.”

“It was a scene long to be remembered by those who saw it,” another newspaper article noted. “Only two flickering lights were in the hands of the crowd and the night was very dark. These lights made the scene all the more gruesome and awful.”

At least two more volleys were fired by the mob before it scattered and disappeared as mysteriously as it had formed. Eight prisoners lay dead where they had fallen, about a hundred yards from the disused jail that still stands behind the Oconee County Courthouse. The corpses remained there, a grisly sight, until long after the sun had risen.

“When day light came, the crowds began to gather,” one newspaper account ran, “and many people were soon on their way to Watkinsville ... It was an awful sight that met the gaze at the scene of the lynching. The upturned faces of the men had a look of terror upon them. All were shot through the body several times ... Some of them were half dressed, others had nearly all their clothes on them. Last night was a cool night and they had evidently gone to bed with their clothes on in some instances.”

The account continued: “As the crowd multiplied the curious insisting on taking cartridge shells and others things as mementoes of the horrible affair, but this was soon stopped by the officers.”

Only one of the victims, Lon J. Aycock, had begged the mob to spare his life, vehemently protesting his innocence and telling them they were killing an innocent man. The hole in his chest caused by the bullets was as big as a man's fist.

Miraculously, one of the nine prisoners removed from the jail survived the mob's firing squad--a black man named Joe Patterson. Patterson was stretched out full length on the ground, having managed to loosen a cord which had tied

his neck to a fence post. A doctor noticed he was still breathing. He had two nonfatal bullet wounds in his body.

A tenth prisoner, Ed Thrasher, described as “the negro [sic] gambler,” escaped the firing squad only because the mob somehow overlooked him in the misdemeanor side of the jail. Using the racist lingo so prevalent then, a Georgia newspaper described the fortunate Thrasher two days later as “the happiest darky [sic] in Oconee county.”

The June 29, 1905 Oconee County lynching episode is one of the three worst lynching incidents involving a black victim in recorded American history. In only two other such incidents--one in South Carolina in 1889 and one in Kentucky in 1908--were eight persons lynched at one time.

After the lynching the pattern of events in Oconee County was typical of what usually happened in the South in those days following a lynching. In public the lynchings were universally condemned, and the members of the mob were accused of being outsiders from nearby counties. “Our people have a deep respect for the law and deeply regret this unfortunate tragedy,” announced Oconee County's state representative. Rewards were offered. Grand jury investigations were conducted and subpoenas issued. But in the end no one was punished--or even arrested or indicted--for the eight murders.

The June 29 lynchings could have been prevented. The afternoon before the lynchings a man rode on horseback 14 miles from Morgan County to Watkinsville to warn that a lynching was imminent; but he was not believed. That a Morgan county resident possessed such accurate information tends to support the view that the lynchers were in fact not from Oconee County.

The day after the eight lynchings, the House of Representatives of the Georgia passed, unanimously, a curious resolution condemning the June 29, 1905 lynching incident. It refers to the mob as “masked murderers,” decries “the bloody injuries inflicted upon the unfortunate victims of this crime,” and describes the mob's killings as “cruel, barbarous, and inexcusable.” Yet the resolution, in also “condemning the crime[s] with which the prisoners were charged,” appears to presume the guilt of the eight murdered men. The resolution also ends in a whimper, stating semiapologetically that the representatives were being “forced to condemn the action of the mob.”

Causes of the June 29, 1905 Lynching Incident

One cause of the June 29 lynching was a terrifying double murder of an elderly couple, Mr. and Mrs. F. M. Holbrook, which had occurred near Watkinsville six weeks earlier, on May 11. AGED COUPLE BRAINED WITH AN AX AT THEIR HOME NEAR WATKINSVILLE, screamed the local headlines.

In an apparent robbery, both Holbrooks were beaten to death in their home, their skulls crushed and mutilated by an ax or iron bar. "There is much excitement among the citizens," an Atlanta newspaper reported, "and if the guilty parties are caught they will probably be severely dealt with." Another newspaper story on the Holbrook murders carried this headline: CITIZENS GREATLY INCENSED; CAPTURE MEANS LYNCHING.

Police arrested Lon J. Aycock, a white man, and charged him with having hired three black men--Claude Elder and two brothers, Lewis and Rich Robinson--to rob and murder the Holbrook couple. All four murder suspects were among the eight prisoners executed by the mob on June 29, 1905.

The immediate cause of the June 29 lynching was an alleged attempt by a black man, Sandy Price, to rape a white woman near Watkinsville two days before the lynchings. Newspapers reported that "in less than fifteen minutes fully forty armed men were on the scene in buggies and on foot." Price was tracked down a half mile away, surrounded, shot at, seized, and conveyed under strong guard to jail. Price's alleged offense produced great public alarm. It "set the people of Watkinsville wild with excitement," said an Athens newspaper.

Sandy Price was one of the prisoners shot to death by the mob on June 29, 1905.

Rufus Moncrief Killed in 1917

On Sept. 19, 1917, the front page of The Athens Banner carried this headline: NEGRO FOUND YESTERDAY MORNING SHOT TO DEATH, TIED TO A TREE. It is uncertain, however, whether the death of 27-year old Rufus Moncrief involved a lynching.

Moncrief's corpse, punctured with 15 bullet holes, was found near what is now Whitehall Road in a wooded area not far from Simonton Bridge, just inside the Oconee County line. Near the body was a card saying: "He assaulted one white woman; he will never wrong another."

According to article in The Atlanta Constitution on Sept. 19, 1917, persons living near the place where Moncrief's body was found reported that shortly

after midnight on Tuesday, September 18 two automobiles drove to the scene from the direction of Watkinsville. The witnesses reported “that a fusillade of shots was heard, and that the machines went back toward Watkinsville.”

Local police, however, doubted that Moncrief had been lynched. The Athens Banner stated that “it is generally believed ... that the death of the negro [sic] was the result of a gambling quarrel, and not lynching. Nobody in the neighborhood had heard of any assault and there was evidence that the negro [sic] had been implicated with others in a Sunday ‘skin game.’” According to the newspaper, “the negro [sic] was probably killed and then dragged to the spot, roped up to the small trees and shot full of holes, the card being written to throw the officers off the real track and leave the impression that his death was the finale of another lynching bee [sic!].”

The death of Rufus Moncrief, therefore, cannot be regarded as a confirmed lynching incident. Nonetheless, the circumstantial and historical evidence, when viewed dispassionately, does appear to make it more likely than not that Moncrief was in fact lynched.

West Hale and George Lowe Lynched in 1921

The last lynching incident in Oconee County was on the afternoon of Sunday, Dec. 4, 1921. It claimed the lives of two victims, West Hale and George Lowe.

That afternoon a mob/posse (many lynchings were committed by posses engaging in acts of violence that exceeded their legal authority) had tracked down Aaron Birdsong and surrounded him in a gully near Sloan's Mill, four miles from Watkinsville, the county seat of Oconee County. Birdsong, a black man, was suspected of having entered on the previous day the house of a white farmer for the purpose of attacking the farmer's wife and daughter. Once Birdsong had been trapped a furious gunfight ensued in which both sides fired numerous shots and Birdsong was killed. Birdsong's corpse was mutilated by a fusillade of shots and then burnt that night.

Shortly after Birdsong's death investigators obtained information that West Hale and George Lowe allegedly had furnished Birdsong with ammunition and other assistance. The mob/posse therefore immediately went to the homes of Hale and Lowe, about six miles from Watkinsville, seized the two men, and took them to near the spot where Birdsong had died. Both men were then shot to death and their corpses pumped full of bullets. Before he was shot Hale was tortured by having his feet roasted in a fire.

The next day a story on this incident in The Athens Banner carried this title:
ONE BURNED TWO RIDDLED WITH BULLETS ... LYNCHING IN
OCONEE COUNTY.

In January 1922 four whites were arrested and charged with murdering Hale and Lowe. Only one was ever put on trial, and he was acquitted by a jury that deliberated only 45 minutes.