The history of lynchings in the American South is a somber yet enlightening story. One chapter of that story took place in Oconee County, where, in the first half of this century, there were two, perhaps three, lynchings that claimed the lives of 10 to 11 people. All the victims, except one, were black.

Lynchings are not necessarily hangings, but any kind of murder perpetrated by a group acting under the pretext of tradition of service to justice, race or tradition. Though not solely a Southern phenomenon, statistics confirm the intimate connection between lynchings and white racism in the South. 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 percent of whom were lynched in the Southern states. Between 1882 and 1930, 83 percent of all lynching victims outside the South and Border States were white, whereas in the Southern and Border states during this period 85 percent of lynching victims were black.

Georgia was one of the leading Southern states in terms of lynchings. 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, raving 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!" Comments such as these received wide support in Georgia.

THE LYNCHING OF 1905: "DUMB HORROR"

Books on neighboring 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. The incident, in the words of a contemporary newspaper account, caused "[t]he people of Watkinsville to stand in dumb horror."

The immediate cause of the lynching was an alleged attempt by a black man, Sandy Price, to rape a white woman near Watkinsville two days earlier. Forty armed men tracked down Price a half mile away, where he was surrounded, shot at, seized, and conveyed under strong guard to jail. An Athens newspaper said Price's alleged offense had "set the people of Watkinsville wild with excitement."

Another cause for the lynching was outrage over a notorious double murder near Watkinsville six weeks earlier. Lon J. Aycock, a white man, was awaiting trial on charges of being an accomplice to the crime. He had been charged with hiring three black men — Claude Elder and two brothers, Lewis and Rich Robinson — to carry it out. Elder and the Robinson brothers were awaiting trial along with Aycock in the Oconee County Jail. At around 2 a.m. on a Thursday, a masked mob of 40 to 100 men in buggies or on horseback silently entered Watkinsville with military precision. The mob went to the house of the town marshal and forced him to accompany them to the old jailhouse, which still stands behind the Oconee County Courthouse. 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 jailer 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. Besides Aycock, Elder, the Robinson brothers and Sandy Price, the mob also seized 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 undisclosed charges.

According to a story in a Savannah newspaper, "The mob opened all the cells, bring-
town had not been aroused. At the command by the leader of 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 went flying to the side.

"It was a scene long to be remembered by those who saw it," another newspaper article noted. "Never before did firing lights be 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 jail. The corpses remained there, a grisly sight, until long after the night had passed.

Only one of the victims, Lon J. Aycock, had begged the mob to spare his life. He bitterly protested his innocence and telling them that he was an innocent man. The hole in his chest caused by the bullets was as big as a man's fist.

In a miraculous quirk of fate, one of the nine prisoners removed from the jail survived the mob's firing squad — a black man named Joe Patterson. He was found lying stretched out on the ground, having managed to lose a cord which had tied his neck to a fence post. A doctor noticed he was still breathing. Patterson had two inrata- tional bullet wounds to his chest and his head.

A tenth prisoner, Ed Thrasher, described as "the negro 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's two days later as "the happiest day in Oconee county."

The June 29, 1905 Oconee County lynching episode was one of the worst lynchings involving a black victim in recorded American history. In only two other such incidents — one in South Carolina in 1899 and one in Kentucky in 1908 — were as many as eight persons lynched at one time.

After the lynching, the pattern of events in Oconee County was typical. In pub- lic the lynchings were universally condemned, and the members of the mob were accused of being outsiders from nearby coun- ties. 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. It is possible that the incident could have been prevented at the first place. The after- noon before the lynchings a man rode on horseback 14 miles from Morgan County to Watkinsville to warn there a lynching was in progress, but was not believed.

The day afterword, the House of Representatives of Georgia passed, unani- mously, a resolution condemning the in- cident. It decrees "the bloody injuries inflicted upon the unfortunate victims of this crime," 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. And the resolution "that the state of Georgia denounces semipolitical- ly that the representatives be being forced to condemn the action of the mob."

1917: THE SHADOW DEATH OF RUFUS MONCRIEF

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 bul- let holes, was found near what is now Whitehall Road in a wooded area not far from Williamston Bridge, just inside the Oconee County line. Near the body was a card saying, "He assaulted one white woman; he was lynched." According to an 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 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 had been implicated with others in a Sunday 'skim game.'"

According to the newspaper, "the negro was probably killed and then dragged to the spot, roped 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."

The death of Rufus Moncrief, therefore, cannot be regarded as a confirmed lynching incident. Nonetheless, the historical evi- dence, when viewed dispassionately, makes it more likely than not that Moncrief was in fact lynched.

THE LAST LYNCHING: WEST HALE AND GEORGE LOWE

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 posse (many lynch- ings were committed by posses engaging in acts of violence that exceeded their legal authority) had tracked down Aaron Birdsong and sur- rounded him in a gully near Sloan's Mill, four miles from Wat- kinsville. Birdsong, a black man, was suspected of having entered on the previous day the house of a white farmer for the pur- pose 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 torched.

Shortly after Birdsong's death investiga- tors obtained information that West Hale and George Lowe allegedly had furnished murder weapons and other assistance to a posse. The posse 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.

Both white victims were tortured by having their feet roasted in a fire.

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.