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STRANGE FRUIT: The Forgotten Lynchings of Northwest Tennessee and Southwestern Kentucky, 1869-1931

Melinda Meador

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**STRANGE FRUIT:
THE FORGOTTEN LYNCHINGS OF NORTHWEST TENNESSEE
AND SOUTHWESTERN KENTUCKY,
1869-1931**

A Thesis
Presented to
the Faculty of the Department of History
Murray State University
Murray, Kentucky

In Partial Fulfillment
of the Requirements for the Degree
of Master of Arts in History

by
Melinda Meador
December 2021

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

I became a graduate assistant in the Department of History at Murray State University in the fall of 1977. It was one of the happiest times of my life. Perhaps I enjoyed graduate school too much because at the end of the two-year program I still had not written my thesis. Looking for a way to avoid learning how to transfer historical data to punch cards, I took the LSAT on a whim. Three months later, I found myself apologizing to my thesis director Dr. Joseph Cartwright and heading for law school. I managed to complete that degree in the requisite three years and have practiced law ever since.

In 2016, after decades of city life, I convinced my charmingly urbane husband that we should move to rural northwest Tennessee, to the family farm where my ancestors settled in 1829. I opened a law office in a small town nearby and began to think about the possibility of finally finishing my M. A. in history at Murray State. In 2017, I contacted the chairman of the department, Dr. Kathy Callahan, and the director of the history department's graduate program, Dr. David Pizzo, and they somehow managed to get me reinstated as a graduate student. I am sure neither of them realizes what a gift readmission was to me.

When I walk down the hall of the history department now, the names on the doors have all changed. I remember the professors I thought of as friends 40+ years ago and find myself wishing I could see them one more time to thank them for the examples of camaraderie and scholarship they set for me. One of my favorites, Dr. Ken Wolf, has at least remained in Murray, and I am delighted that we can still get together for an

occasional beer. I am forever in his debt for introducing me to the world's great religions and philosophers (in particular, Hannah Arendt, whose concept of the banality of evil has proved very useful for a lawyer as well as an historian), and for kindly suggesting to me at the right moment that I was probably better suited to the law than academia.

Reverie aside, I have truly enjoyed being in classrooms again with Dr. Duane Bolin and with Dr. James Humphreys, whose graduate course on women's history was particularly illuminating, and I am very grateful to Drs. Brian Clardy and Bill Mulligan for graciously agreeing to serve on my thesis committee. Most of all, I am indebted to Dr. Humphreys, who willingly took on the chore of directing my thesis and who has always been available when I needed a sounding board or a keen editorial eye. He's a peach (contraction intended).

My interest in lynching, strangely enough, grew from my interest in Southern arts and crafts. In 2009, while viewing an exhibit at the Knoxville Museum of Art called "Tradition/Innovation: American Masterpieces of Southern Craft and Traditional Art," I came upon a quilt entitled "Blood of the Slaughtered I," created by fiber artist Gwendolyn A. Magee. The quilt was the color of ash with an image in indigo of a body hanging from a tree. The name, date, and location of every known victim of lynching in the United States was hand-stitched on the quilt. To my horror, I discovered that a man named L. C. Dumas had been lynched in my hometown on June 8, 1893. That quilt sent me on a mission to learn everything I possibly could about lynchings in northwest Tennessee. I began by reading two books which later served as inspiration for my thesis topic. The first was *A Festival of Violence: An Analysis of Southern Lynchings*,

1882-1930, by Stewart E. Tolnay and E. M. Beck. Both authors were kind enough to correspond with me about my research and to give me access to their master inventory of lynchings, which proved to be an invaluable resource for my analysis. The second book was *Lethal Punishment: Lynchings and Legal Executions in the South*, by Margaret Vandiver. I struck up a correspondence with Dr. Vandiver, and, over the past ten years, we have become friends. Her dedication to justice inspires me every day.

My husband, Milton McNally, has shown the patience of Job over the past four years. He has listened dutifully and commented approvingly as I read aloud large portions of this thesis -- some portions more than once -- and, perhaps more importantly, has provided sustenance throughout. My son, Jake Knanishu, discussed every aspect of this paper with me at one time or another and offered numerous insights which, more often than I might care to admit, caused me to rethink my arguments. He is my best hope for the future. Finally, I wish to acknowledge my mother, who instilled in me a thirst for knowledge for its own sake, and my father, who from the day I was born believed the world was my oyster. I am the luckiest woman alive to have had the support of such a family.

ABSTRACT

In the 50 years between 1869 and 1918, 50 African Americans were lynched in a sparsely populated three-county area, far removed from the Cotton Belt and outside the ambit of the Tobacco Black Patch, along the state line in northwest Tennessee and southwestern Kentucky. The characteristics of lynchings identified in previous studies have little relevance to the lynchings carried out in this three-county area where the African American population seldom exceeded twenty percent. Unlike the Deep South, the practice appears not to have been driven by socio-economic and political factors but primarily by a lust for violence which manifested itself in aggressive guerrilla tactics during the Civil War and in various vigilante groups for many years after the war.

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CHAPTER I INTRODUCTION

This thesis reflects an attempt to understand how a region of small farms and towns with a predominantly white population in the border states of Tennessee and Kentucky could have been responsible for a disproportionately large number of lynchings in the latter part of the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. The reasons usually associated with a high number of racially motivated lynchings simply do not seem to apply to the region. The search for answers included a review of Civil War history in the border states and an examination of the existing criminal justice system, as well as a close look at American violence in general during the relevant time period. It also involved a case by case analysis of each post-Civil War lynching that took place in a three-county area which I refer to as the Tri-Counties and covers Obion and Lake Counties in northwest Tennessee and Fulton County in southwestern Kentucky. One lynching in particular received an in-depth analysis because of its uniqueness in being the best known and, at the same time, least representative of all the 57 lynchings which occurred in the Tri-Counties.

Based on this analysis, I conclude that the impulse to lynch was driven, not by socio-economic factors or as a means of controlling the black community, but by nothing other than racial hatred in a region steeped in Confederate history and accustomed to white male violence. African Americans were not lynched randomly or for mere social infractions as they were in other parts of the South, and there were no spectacle lynchings in the area. African Americans were lynched largely for the same reasons as white men,

but they were lynched far more frequently. They were also lynched for one reason that white men were not -- the alleged sexual assault of white women and children.

Source Material

Lynchings are notoriously difficult to investigate, because few people involved in a lynching wanted to discuss it after the fact. Additionally, lynchings occurred in a time before memoirs became popular, and personal diaries tended to cover day-to-day life -- not extraordinary, controversial events. As a practical matter, the only accounts of lynchings were to be found in newspapers. Newspapers themselves were often unreliable sources. Because the Tri-Counties were in a relatively remote area, far away from even regional newspapers, reporting was often secondhand. Local reporters seem to have relied on gossip as well as facts, and it is often difficult to distinguish between the two. Newsrooms and editors also made errors. News items were typically picked up by one paper and wired to other papers -- almost as though hand to hand -- so that someone might misread the teletype or even a telegram and accidentally alter the spellings of names and places. Names in particular might vary. Throughout this paper, I have chosen to use the name which seems most likely to be accurate, and I have used that name consistently throughout the paper; however, a list of lynching victims, included in the Appendix, contains the alternative names and spellings used by the press in connection with each victim. The source of the story was also often misinterpreted. If, for example, the *Memphis Avalanche* carried a dateline from Union City, Tennessee, a newspaper in St. Louis picking up the story off the wire might interpret the dateline to mean that the

events in the story occurred in Union City when, in reality, the events occurred in Tiptonville, Tennessee.

Despite discrepancies, for purposes of this paper, I have accepted as truth a report that someone was in fact lynched if the story appeared in at least several newspapers and appeared credible. Working on the assumption that, the closer the report to the source, the more likely the report is to be accurate, I have cited regional newspapers -- particularly Paducah, Louisville, Memphis, and Nashville papers -- whenever possible.¹

News coverage for several of the lynchings in the Tri-Counties was fairly extensive in newspapers across the country, and many of those have been preserved on the Library of Congress “Chronicling America” website and at Newspapers.com.² Regional newspapers in Paducah, Louisville, and Nashville occasionally sent reporters to cover a big story in person, although often the news sources remain a mystery. It is very fortunate that Hickman, Kentucky, had a weekly newspaper which has been preserved largely intact and is now widely available. The *Hickman Courier* was a small town newspaper located in the county seat of Fulton County. In addition to giving at least some account of almost every lynching occurring in the Tri-Counties throughout the period of its publication from 1868 until 1922, it also provides a contemporary window into day-to-day life in the Tri-Counties during Reconstruction and after.

¹ Margaret Vandiver, *Lethal Punishment: Lynchings and Legal Executions in the South* (New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 2006), Appendix A, at 193.

² Library of Congress “Chronicling America” website, <https://chroniclingamerica.loc.gov>; Newspapers.com website, <https://www.newspapers.com/papers/>.

Originally owned by George Warren, the *Hickman Courier* was a weekly conservative Democratic paper with a distinctive Southern bias. While it covered some national and international events, especially presidential campaigns, it was a true small town newspaper with a regional reach that extended to Obion and Lake Counties in particular, and, to a lesser extent, all the far western counties in Kentucky and Tennessee. The paper presented Hickman as an ideal Southern river city with an active business community and gracious inhabitants, and the editors worked hard to deflect any negative attention that might detract from the town's wholesome appeal. If African Americans appeared in the news at all it was usually in connection with crimes committed by African Americans, who, as far as the editors were concerned, were guilty when charged. As for violence against African Americans, according to the *Hickman Courier*, it was always well deserved even when the hard facts suggested otherwise.

Other valuable primary sources of information included United States Census records, and the Census's separate agricultural reports for the years 1900 and 1910, court records for the events surrounding the notorious Night Rider trials, land and probate records concerning the estate of lynching victim David Walker, oral and written interviews with members of the Fulton community and a Walker descendent, and the correspondence of Kentucky Governor Augustus Willson. In addition to these primary sources, the national lynching victim database compiled by E. M. Beck and Stewart Tolnay provided invaluable, readily accessible data which allowed me to make comparisons I would not otherwise have been able to make. I have also relied upon ground that has already been plowed in local histories and in the vast wealth of lynching

research and analysis previously compiled by scholars across a range of disciplines including history, sociology, and philosophy. Only by crossing disciplines can we hope to understand the nature and culture that allowed mob violence directed at African Americans to flourish in the aftermath of the Civil War and well into the Jim Crow era.

Definitions and Parameters

It is not as easy to define “lynching” as it might appear. Tolnay and Beck chose to use the definition applied by the NAACP when the NAACP published its first inventory of lynchings in 1919. The NAACP definition required that “(1) there must be evidence that a person was killed; (2) the person must have met death illegally; (3) a group of three or more persons must have participated in the killing; and (4) the group must have acted under the pretext of service to justice or tradition.”³ Margaret Vandiver in *Lethal Punishment*, used a similar definition with two small but significant differences: (1) she referred simply to “a group,” without designating a minimum number in the group, and (2) she broadened the pretext of service to include race as well as justice or tradition.⁴ The second modification is particularly useful because, in some instances, the only apparent motivation for a lynching was racial.

³ Stewart E. Tolnay and E. M. Beck, *A Festival of Violence: An Analysis of Southern Lynchings, 1882-1930* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1995), Appendix A, at 259-260.

⁴ Vandiver, *Lethal Punishment*, Appendix A, at 188-189. Vandiver’s definition is identical to the definition cited by W. Fitzhugh Brundage in *Lynching in the New South: Georgia and Virginia, 1880-1930* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1959; paperback ed., 1993), which he attributed to a 1940 meeting of the Association of Southern Women to Prevent Lynchings (ASWPL). See Brundage, *Lynching in the New South*, 16, fn. 1.

While these definitions are workable, they are nonetheless problematic -- especially when attempting to determine the size of a group and the reason for the group's actions. Many of the lynchings in the Tri-Counties, particularly in Fulton County, occurred late at night by unseen men who might have numbered two or twenty. Furthermore, in some instances, as in the case of the Walker family, the motivation was unclear. In other words, some of the deaths which have previously been labelled lynchings may more accurately be described simply as murders. For the sake of consistency, however, this paper will follow the traditional definitions outlined above, while making note of those cases which seem to be at variance with those definitions.

At times throughout the paper, I have referred to "lynching incidents" as opposed to lynchings. Occasionally, a mob lynched more than one person arising out of one alleged crime. On at least two occasions, men were captured and lynched on different days even though they were alleged to be co-conspirators. For purposes of this paper, I refer to a lynching incident as the date on which one or more people were lynched for a related alleged crime. By that measure, there were 41 lynching incidents in the Tri-Counties, while a total of 57 people were lynched between 1869 and 1931.

Of course, lynchings were only the most obvious and virulent expression of white supremacy in the South. As Fitzhugh Brundage pointed out in his seminal work, *Lynching in the New South: Georgia and Virginia 1880-1930*, "The ideology of white supremacy gave license to violence of all kinds against blacks."⁵ Some of the other expressions of white supremacy in the Tri-Counties will also be explored in this paper

⁵ Brundage, *Lynching in the New South*, 19.

in order to place lynchings within the context of white community standards and the subordination of African Americans living and working in proximity to the white community. Those expressions included everything from ridicule and belittlement to expulsion from the greater community, as well as simple silence in the face of racial violence. As these other expressions of white supremacy make clear, even if lynchings were conducted by only a handful of white men at any given time over five or six decades, they were but an extreme manifestation of a contempt widely shared by the white community at large and must be understood within that context.

CHAPTER II

AN OVERVIEW OF LYNCHING AND ITS ROLE IN THE TRI-COUNTIES

Lynching as a method of punishment has a long history which dates back to the Revolutionary War era, when a magistrate in Virginia named Charles Lynch appears to have taken it upon himself to sentence and punish Tories guilty of treason without the necessity for appearing in court. Judge Lynch himself used the term “Lynch law” to describe his methods, which were well known and even condoned by Thomas Jefferson, then Governor of Virginia. Following the Revolutionary War, Virginians made their way to the frontier carrying Lynch law with them. Most of those Virginians eventually settled in Kentucky and Tennessee — many of them in what came to be known as the Jackson Purchase.⁶

It was not until well after Reconstruction that lynching came to be identified almost exclusively with racially motivated mob violence resulting in murder. African American journalists in the 1880s and 1890s promoted the use of the term as a means of identifying racial extrajudicial killings in the hope that recognizing and tabulating such acts would lead to reform.⁷ Lynching as a label had its advantages. In 1895, Ida B. Wells published *The Red Record: Tabulated Statistics and Alleged Causes of Lynching in the United States, 1892-1894*. She continued amassing statistical data on lynchings throughout her career, and contributed to the *Chicago Tribune*’s annual list of all U. S. lynchings, which the paper began publishing in 1882. In 1919, the NAACP published a

⁶ Christopher Waldrep, *The Many Faces of Judge Lynch: Extralegal Violence and Punishment in America* (New York: Palsgrave, 2002), 22.

⁷ Waldrep, *The Many Faces of Judge Lynch*, 97-112.

more comprehensive list in a publication entitled *30 Years of Lynching in the United States: 1889-1918*. These lists provided the name, date, and location of a given lynching, as well as an alleged reason for the lynching. Reform, however, did not immediately follow the creation of these lists. On the contrary, providing an alleged reason seemed to encourage white rationalizations for the practice. Assault, rape, thievery, arson, even unpleasant interactions with a white person served as justification for lynching an African American. In the minds of the white perpetrators and the communities who protected them, use of the word lynching in fact may have provided more cover than simply calling it murder would have. To whites, lynching suggested a quasi-legal basis for the crime committed. It suggested a right to act in the name of a community where no such right existed. It suggested people rising up and taking the law into their own hands. In other words, in the eyes of the white community, lynching was not murder. Of course, the underlying justification was seldom investigated. It was enough simply to be accused of a crime or misdeed. The mob took charge — often overriding law enforcement authorities — and did what it deemed necessary either without a trial or even during a trial in instances where the verdict seemed to be a foregone conclusion.

The practice of lynching in the Tri-Counties had little, if anything, to do with how well the county and circuit court systems functioned. In fact, as the local newspapers reveal, the Tri-Counties had very active judges and grand juries. One historian has said that West Tennesseans in particular “had a mania for a government based on law,” even

as violence was an accepted part of everyday life.⁸ The same could be said about Fulton County. Lynching was simply capital punishment, or “summary punishment,” undertaken in service to what legal historian Trinyan Mariano has referred to as a “higher law.” As described by Dr. Mariano, lynching at the end of the nineteenth century “was still widely seen as a ‘collective violent expression of popular sovereignty.’” In the minds of white citizens, lynching was considered lawful “[b]ecause the will of the people *is* the law, when formal laws or institutions do not suffice.” Indeed, lynching was perceived to be “necessary for the preservation of the state, the formulas of law, and the sovereignty of the people.”⁹

This way of thinking was not simply theoretical. For example, in March 1913, when the Tennessee legislature began consideration of a bill to eliminate capital punishment, the Union City *Commercial* carried a lengthy editorial entitled “Lynching,” in which the paper claimed that lynching, without regard to “race or color lines,” was still necessary because civilization was not “ready for the abolition of capital punishment” in any form. Having just witnessed a lynching in downtown Union City on March 21, 1913, the paper’s editor was careful to justify the town’s own use of lynching:

In days gone by Union City was beleaguered with an organization of burglars and ruffians, as dirty a set of criminals as ever infested the habitation of man. The law was powerless and lived in dread

⁸ Vandiver, *Lethal Punishment*, 31, quoting Betty Baird Tilly, “Aspects of Social and Economic Life in West Tennessee before the Civil War” (Ph.D. diss., Memphis State University, 1974), 296.

⁹ Trinyan Mariano, “The Law of Torts and the Logic of Lynching in Charles Chesnutt’s ‘The Marrow of Tradition,’” *PMLA*, v. 128, no. 3 (May 2013), pp. 559-574, 565, <https://www.jstor.org/stable/23489293>, accessed Feb. 27, 2021. Internal quotation from Waldrep, *The Many Faces of Judge Lynch*, 14.

and fear for months. Night after night the homes were ravaged. A number of citizens were injured and several lost their lives. Vigilance committees were formed and the manhood of the city was asserted. . . . There were no race or color lines, and the elm tree at the old fairgrounds told the tale. Peace was restored and reigned for many years and still prevails with the exception of an occasional outcropping and the outbreak last week followed by summary punishment.¹⁰

There were simply some particularly “dirty” criminals -- both black and white -- who did not respond to the law and for whom lynching was the only solution if peace and order were to be maintained in the community. In other words, lynching was not a failing of the legal system; it transcended the legal system. It functioned as a higher law.

Two years later, on March 26, 1915, the *Union City Commercial Courier* reprinted an editorial from the *Nashville Banner* which went a step further and essentially drew a color line in emphasizing the need for capital punishment:

There is in Tennessee a large element of primitive people who are not to be dealt with after the manner of refined ethics of some latter-day sociologists. . . . Among the people in Tennessee who may be called primitive are included the bulk of illiterate negroes, from whom the criminals of the race mostly come, but there are whites in remote regions to whom the term would not be inapplicable. People of this kind, whether white or black, need something concrete to reach their sensibilities.¹¹

As this particular editorial demonstrates, a certain category of backwoods whites might still be subject to higher law, but, increasingly as the South moved into the twentieth century, the white community viewed lynching as a means of controlling “primitive

¹⁰ “Lynching,” *Commercial* (Union City, TN), Mar. 28, 1913.

¹¹ “Capital Punishment,” *Commercial Courier* (Union City, TN), Mar. 26, 1915.

people,” who were intellectually and socially inferior to the majority of whites. In the Southern schema, most of those inferior people were black.

Even with legalized capital punishment, white communities wanted the threat of lynching hanging over the heads of African American men as a means of warding off sexual assaults on white women.¹² At the time, one of the most prominent voices to advance the pro-lynching argument as a deterrent to sexual assault was that of Finis Garrett, the U. S. Representative from northwest Tennessee’s Congressional District between 1905 and 1929. Garrett, a Democrat and lawyer from Weakley County, rose

¹² The death penalty for murder was abolished briefly in Tennessee, between 1915 and 1919, thanks largely to the tireless campaign waged by one man, Duke C. Bowers, a very successful Memphis grocery store owner who sold his businesses and moved to Dresden in Weakley County in 1912. The push to reinstate the death penalty for murder began immediately upon the death of Bowers in 1917. Governor Albert H. Roberts requested repeal of the so-called Bowers Bill out of concern that lynch mobs would deliver a form of punishment which the State could not. “Duke C. Bowers (1874-1917),” biographical entry by Margaret Vandiver, *Tennessee Encyclopedia*, <http://tennesseeencyclopedia.net/entry.php?rec=1560>.

Even during the years when the death penalty was abolished for murder, it was retained in cases of rape, and four men, all black, were executed in the electric chair between 1916 and 1919. Electrocution replaced hanging in Tennessee in 1915. “Tennessee Executions,” <https://www.tn.gov/correction/statistics-and-information/executions/tennessee-executions.html>.

It is notable that of the 138 people who have been legally executed in Tennessee since 1916, only one, Robert Glen Coe, a white man, has been from northwest Tennessee. In 2000, Coe, from Weakley County, became the first man to be executed in Tennessee since 1960, when the U. S. Supreme Court imposed a moratorium on the death penalty. He had been convicted and sentenced to death in 1981 for the 1979 rape and murder of an 8-year old girl in Greenfield, Tennessee. During his trial, the threat of a lynch mob required that armed guards be posted on the roof of the Weakley County Courthouse to ensure his safe passage in and out of the building each day. Bob Cowser, Jr., *Green Fields: Crime, Punishment, and a Boyhood Between* (New Orleans: University of New Orleans Press, 2009), 79; “Portrait of a Killer,” *Jackson Sun* (Jackson, TN), Mar. 19, 2000.

within party ranks to become Minority Leader of the House in 1923 and remained in that position until he left Congress in 1929.¹³ Described as a highly successful and “profoundly conservative” politician, he opposed women’s suffrage, protections for children in the work place, and federal grants for highway construction.¹⁴ He also opposed federal anti-lynching legislation and took an active role in defeating the Dyer Anti-Lynching Bill in 1922. Frequently credited with a comment that the Dyer Bill was “a bill to encourage rape,” Garrett was also quoted in the *New York Times* as saying to his fellow Congressmen during hearings on the bill:

You gentlemen do not know what it is to live in a section where a wife dare not travel alone in the fields. You do not know what it is to raise a daughter who after the age of 10 years lives under the shadow of a Damoclean sword. When you put these ideas in the heads of those few black beasts of the 10,000,000 of their race, you are increasing the commission of crime.¹⁵

If the highly respected, soon-to-be Minority Leader of the U. S. House of Representatives believed in 1921 that the practice of lynching was not only acceptable but necessary to ensure the protection of white wives and daughters, why should his constituents have thought otherwise?

¹³ “Finis J. Garrett,” <https://history.house.gov/People/Detail/13664>, accessed June 6, 2017.

¹⁴ “Congressman Finis J. Garrett,” <https://knoxfocus.com/columnist/congressman-finis-j-garrett-2/>, accessed June 6, 2017.

¹⁵ Barbara Holden-Smith, “Lynching, Federalism, and the Intersection of Race and Gender in the Progressive Era,” *Yale Journal of Law & Feminism* 8 (1996), 56, <https://digitalcommons.law.yale.edu/cgi/viewcontent.cgi?article=1111&context=yjlf>; “Southern Men Fight Anti-Lynching Bill,” *New York Times*, Dec. 20, 1921.

Lynchings became increasingly rare -- if no less violent -- over the course of the early twentieth century, and, as the dialogue around racial issues shifted to civil rights in the 1950s, the impact of lynching on American race relations attracted little scholarly attention. That changed in 1995, when Stewart E. Tolnay and E. M. Beck published the first truly comprehensive study of racially motivated lynchings in America. Entitled *A Festival of Violence: An Analysis of Southern Lynchings, 1882-1930*, the book relied upon statistical data to examine certain economic and social issues which might explain the causes of lynching. Specifically, Tolnay and Beck set out to demonstrate that “whites lynched African-Americans when they felt threatened in some way -- economically, politically, or socially.”¹⁶ One graphic depiction of the data was a map of the Southern counties most prone to lynchings between 1882 and 1930. The authors noted: “[I]t appears that lynchings were concentrated in a swath running through Georgia, Alabama, Mississippi, and Louisiana -- the region often referred to as the ‘Black Belt.’” In that region which represented the former bastion of plantation culture, the African American population often outnumbered the white population. In addition to the Black Belt, Tolnay and Beck commented on “another area of intensive mob activity” in southern Georgia and the panhandle of Florida which has historically been associated with lynchings.¹⁷

What is most striking about the Tolnay and Beck map, however, is the concentration of lynchings in areas *not* typically associated with lynchings -- in particular, a pocket of counties, highlighted by black dots representing lynchings, lying

¹⁶ Tolnay and Beck, *A Festival of Violence*, 3.

¹⁷ Tolnay and Beck, *A Festival of Violence*, Figure 2-5, at 36. See also Figure 2-8, at 46.

hundreds of miles north of the Delta along the Tennessee-Kentucky state line. The lynchings which occurred in those counties went unexamined until historian Margaret Vandiver published *Lethal Punishment: Lynchings and Legal Executions in the South* in 2006. Even then, her work touched only on the counties located in Tennessee -- not the county on the opposite site of the state line in Kentucky.¹⁸

It has been widely assumed that lynchings occurred predominantly in the Black Belt (or “Cotton Belt,” as it is also known), where slavery ensured that African American populations would remain sizable in the aftermath of the Civil War. Northwest Tennessee, in particular the counties bordering Kentucky, had not been part of the Southern plantation economy and culture. Even in the antebellum era, the African American population was only roughly twenty percent, and, after 1870, the numbers declined to less than fifteen percent. For these reasons, it is easy to see why the area was overlooked by historians conducting lynching research, but the area also raises a question that begs to be answered: What could explain the excessive level of racial violence in counties so unlike the regions we typically associate with lynchings?

Sources differ, but reliable historical data suggest that approximately 330 African Americans were lynched across 95 counties in Tennessee between 1866 and 1944.¹⁹ Of those 330 lynchings, Vandiver has confirmed that 56 occurred in a small area comprising seven contiguous counties in northwest Tennessee (Crockett, Dyer, Gibson, Lauderdale,

¹⁸ Vandiver, *Lethal Punishment*, 31.

¹⁹ E. M. Beck and Stewart E. Tolnay, *Inventory of Southern Lynch Victims as of 8 June 2020*, University of Georgia.

Weakley, Lake, and Obion) which seemed especially prone to mob violence.²⁰ My own research, confined to the extreme northwestern counties bordering Kentucky, suggests that 26 African American men, as well as five white men, were lynched in Obion County alone between 1869 and 1931, when the last lynching occurred in the county.

Obion County and neighboring Lake County to the west share a common border with Fulton County, Kentucky. Like Obion County, Lake County and Fulton County frequently resorted to mob violence. Lake County, originally part of Obion County and Tennessee's fifth smallest county in both land mass and population, was formed in 1870 and credited with its first lynching in 1881. In the thirty years between its first lynching and its last in 1910, twelve African American men were lynched in Lake County. Fulton County was even further north of cotton country and located on the far western edge of a region called the Kentucky Tobacco Black Patch, known for its dark-fired tobacco. Without significant numbers of either cotton or tobacco laborers, the county was nevertheless the site of 13 African American lynchings, including a woman and two of her children, as well as one white lynching, between 1877 and 1918.²¹ All told, in the 50 years between 1869 and 1918, 50 African Americans were lynched in a largely rural,

²⁰ Vandiver, *Lethal Punishment*, 31. Vandiver confirmed a total of 66 lynchings -- 56 of which were known to be African American victims. Nine were white victims; one's race was unknown. See Vandiver, *Lethal Punishment*, Appendix B, at 196-199.

²¹ George C. Wright identifies 20 lynchings in Fulton County, but several of those lynchings actually occurred in Obion County and Hickman County, KY, and the number of Walker family members who were murdered in 1908 was four, rather than seven as reported by Wright. George C. Wright, *Racial Violence in Kentucky, 1865-1940: Lynchings, Mob Rule, and "Legal Lynchings"* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1990), Appendix A, at 307-323.

sparsely populated tri-county area along the northwestern border of Tennessee and the southwestern border of Kentucky. Only one lynching occurred after 1918.

In the 25 years since Tolnay and Beck published *A Festival of Violence*, lynching research has shifted from a focus on collecting names and tabulating the massive numbers of lynching victims in the post-Civil War era to an analysis of the characteristics of lynchings. Some studies have drawn conclusions based upon the type of mob and the stated reason given for the lynching. More recent studies have examined lynchings in light of agricultural, economic, and political factors at the regional and national levels. These factors, however, appear to have little relevance to the history of lynchings in the Tri-Counties. Indeed, there is no obvious explanation for the racial violence in the area. Instead, the common thread seems to have been simply a general willingness among men to engage in violence in a region that went from frontier to Civil War to Reconstruction and then Redemption and Jim Crow in the space of one lifetime. The violence of that lifetime, which was not limited to lynchings, was carried into the next generation by families who revered their Confederate past and felt little compassion for those who did not adapt readily to local customs and values, particularly if those who did not adapt were black.

The violence went hand-in-hand with racial hatred. Among the majority of community members who did not engage in violence directly or even necessarily condone it, there was nonetheless a willingness to tolerate it -- especially when directed toward the African American community -- even as some voices in the community protested the violence with increasing frequency in the twentieth century. The peaceable

white community looked away from racial violence, except in its most extreme manifestations, and seems largely to have ignored the African American population in its midst. While mob lynchings and, at least in one case, the murder of a family, may have caused outrage and alarm, the normalized lynching of black men taken from small town jails to be hanged by small mobs of white men went almost unnoticed. These lynchings were part of a white culture which preferred that African Americans stay out of sight and out of mind. Indeed, as recently pointed out in the 1619 Project, blacks moving as equals in a white world called into question both the South's justification for slavery and the broader notion of white exceptionalism.²² The answer was to construct a de facto system of racial apartheid which designated a separate sphere for blacks that kept them out of white society and commerce and severely punished those who trespassed. That system was evident in the Tri-Counties, and local community newspapers not only bore witness to it but in fact perpetuated it.

²² Nikole Hannah-Jones, "The 1619 Project," *New York Times*, Aug. 14, 2019.

CHAPTER III A CULTURE OF VIOLENCE

In 1986, social historian William Lynwood Montell published a book about his investigation of a rural, sparsely populated community on the border between Kentucky and Tennessee approximately 200 hundred miles east of Fulton and Obion Counties. As was true in the Tri-Counties, members of the community shared many common characteristics and passed freely back and forth across the state line. Montell's interest sprang from the fact that 50 homicides occurred in the community between the mid-1880s and 1940. Montell focused on what he called a "subculture of violence" in the community, which he traced specifically to "unrelenting guerrilla activity both during and after" the Civil War. Long after the war was over, members of wartime guerrilla bands, both Union and Confederate, "continued to roam the woods and to lie in wait" for their enemies.²³ Later, war-related violence ceased, "only to be replaced by general mayhem initiated and perhaps perpetuated in many instances by men who had learned the act of killing in guerrilla activities during and after the Civil War."²⁴

While general order and peace were re-established over time, the willingness to resort to violence as a means of self-help had become deeply engrained within the men of the community. In a culture not far removed from the frontier, violence was especially warranted when a man's family or his property was endangered. Violence, even killings, became an acceptable means of maintaining social order. Those killed were understood

²³ William Lynwood Montell, *Killings: Folk Justice in the Upper South* (Lexington, KY: University of Kentucky Press, 1986), 11.

²⁴ Montell, *Killings*, 13.

to have deserved their fate, and those who carried out the killings were thought to be “moral, God-fearing individuals, with full social status within the community.”²⁵ This was true despite the fact that the community benefitted from a fully-functioning legal system: “If the explanation was ‘right’ in the eyes of the neighbors, who generally viewed killing as a response to a precipitating factor, the matter was settled for all time, and the killer was exonerated and reintegrated into the group.”²⁶

The Tri-Counties -- A State Line Community

The similarities between the community described by Montell and the “state line” community of Fulton, Obion and Lake Counties are striking. The Jackson Purchase, where the Tri-Counties are located, was the last portion of both Kentucky and Tennessee to be settled and was still considered the frontier well into the 1830s. As in Central Kentucky and Middle Tennessee, settlers in the region were white Protestants from the Carolinas and Virginia who were prosperous enough to buy land and establish farms. Though most were non-slaveholders, some settlers brought slaves with them, and, by 1860, approximately 18-20 percent of the population of Obion and Fulton Counties was African American.²⁷ Other folk were squatters and homesteaders who found spots on

²⁵ Montell, *Killings*, xv.

²⁶ Montell, *Killings*, 152.

²⁷ U. S. Library of Congress Map showing the distribution of the slave population of the southern states of the United States. Compiled from the census of 1860, <https://www.loc.gov/item/99447026/>.

otherwise unclaimed land and simply stayed.²⁸ There were very few African American free folk.²⁹

Obion County was established on October 24, 1823, and covered 750 square miles, including 39 square miles covered by the waters of Reelfoot Lake. The original county seat was at Troy, established in 1825. Union City, the current county seat, was not established until 1854, when construction began on a rail line to connect Hickman, Kentucky, with Obion County.³⁰ Lake County, located primarily on the west side of Reelfoot Lake, was carved out of Obion County in 1870, in part because it was too far and too dangerous to transport prisoners twenty-five miles across or around the lake from Madrid Bend to the jail in Troy.³¹

By contrast, it was a mere 13 miles from Union City to either Hickman or the town of Fulton in Fulton County, Kentucky. The city of Hickman, established in 1834, quickly developed a reputation as a major regional shipping port on the Mississippi River for both northwest Tennessee, including Obion County, and southwestern Kentucky.

²⁸ Samuel Cole Williams, *Beginnings of West Tennessee: In the Land of the Chickasaws* (Johnson City, TN: Watauga Press, 1930), 174; David G. Hayes, *The Historic Reelfoot Lake Region: An Early History of the People and Places of Western Obion and Present Day Lake County* (Collierville, TN: InstantPublisher.com, Inc., 2017), 61-63.

²⁹ U.S. Census Records, <https://www.censusrecords.com/Search?Year=1860&State=TN&County=Obion>; <https://www.censusrecords.com/Search?Year=1860&State=KY&County=Fulton>. The 1860 census shows 35 black (including “multiple” race) freemen in Obion County, and 17 in Fulton County.

³⁰ R. C. Forrester, entry for “Obion County,” Tennessee Encyclopedia, <https://tennesseeencyclopedia.net/entries/obion-county/>; online excerpt from Elmer G. Sulzer, *Ghost Railroads of Kentucky* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1998), 163, <http://sites.rootsweb.com/~kyfulton/Railroads/railroadtoc.html>.

³¹ Hayes, *Historic Reelfoot Lake Region*, 264-265.

Hickman also became the county seat of Fulton County when Fulton County was carved out of Hickman County in 1845.³²

Not only did Fulton and Obion Counties share a common border, but it was necessary to cross into Obion County to access a portion of Fulton County, known as Madrid Bend, formed by an oxbow in the Mississippi River. Indeed, many of the Scots-Irish and English family surnames in Obion and Fulton Counties were commonly found in both counties. As even Fulton County's website suggests, Fulton County has always been closely allied with Obion County by trade and culture -- an alliance exemplified by both Obion and Fulton Counties' outspoken and aggressive allegiance to the Confederacy during the Civil War and in its aftermath.³³

The Civil War and Guerrilla Activity in the Tri-Counties

It is common to associate the Civil War with the Cotton Belt, but, as the people of Tennessee know only too well, the Civil War was fought largely in the border states where allegiances were deeply divided. West Tennessee itself was divided over whether to secede with seven counties voting against secession. Counties sharing common borders voted differently. Weakley County, for instance, which sits on the eastern line of Obion County and had three times as many slaveholders as Obion County, voted against secession, while Obion County voted overwhelmingly in favor of it by a vote of 2,996 to

³² Hayes, *Historic Reelfoot Lake Region*, 98-99.

³³ City of Hickman website, <http://hickman.cityof.org>; Fulton County, KY website, <http://fulton county.ky.gov>.

64.³⁴ Even though there were relatively few slaveholders in Obion County, 787 men of the county enlisted in the Confederacy, while 361 enlisted with the Union Army.³⁵ Fulton County, which also had relatively few slaveholders, and was part of a state that voted to remain neutral, saw 450 of its men enlist in the Confederacy, while only one man enlisted in the Union Army.³⁶

In 1861, the Tri-Counties and Columbus, Kentucky, just north of Fulton County, became a major staging ground for the war. The Confederate Army in fact occupied Fulton County from September 1861 until April 1862, when Union forces defeated their enemies at the battle of Island No. 10, located in the Mississippi River just north of Madrid Bend.³⁷ Thereafter, federal occupation forces were stationed in Obion County and at Columbus, but, because of Madrid Bend's strategic location on the Mississippi,

³⁴ In 1860, Weakley County had a free population of 14,003 (including 18 free blacks), with 670 slaveholders and 4,213 slaves; Obion County had a free population of 10,418 (including 38 free blacks), with 223 slaveholders and 2,399 slaves. U.S. Census -- 1860, <https://www2.census.gov/library/publications/decennial/1860/population/1860a-33.pdf>; Weakley County Home Page -- 1860 Slave Schedules, https://sites.rootsweb.com/~tnweakle/1860_SlaveOwners.htm; U.S. GenWeb Archives -- Obion County 1860 Slave Schedules, files.usgwarchives.net/tn/obion/census/slaves/1860/dist1-5.txt; Hayes, *Historic Reelfoot Lake Region*, 209.

³⁵ U.S., Confederate Service Records, 1861-1865, ancestry.com/search/collections/2322; ancestry.com/search/collections/2344. By contrast, neighboring Weakley County voted against secession and sent over four times as many men into the Union Army (272) as it sent into the Confederacy (60).

³⁶ In 1860, Fulton County had a free population of 4,239 (including 16 free blacks). According to the 1860 Slave Schedules, there were 216 slaveholders and 1,042 slaves. "Fulton County (KY) Slaves, Free Blacks, and Free Mulattoes, 1850-1870," *Notable Kentucky African Americans Database*, accessed April 29, 2021, <https://nkaa.uky.edu/nkaa/items/show/2343>; Barry Craig, "Jackson Purchase Confederate Troops in the Civil War," jacksonpurchasehistory.org/wp-content/uploads/2011/04/barry_5.pdf.

³⁷ Hayes, *Historic Reelfoot Lake Region*, 215.

the area remained subject to Confederate attacks throughout the war. Indeed, General Nathan B. Forrest and his troops, many of whom were from Obion and Fulton Counties, continued to raid the area to such an extent that, as one writer put it, the area became “a haven for Rebel guerrillas.”³⁸

Guerrillas were not simply private citizens operating outside the conventions of warfare during the Civil War. In April 1862, the Confederate Congress not only passed the Conscription Act, it also authorized partisan service under the Partisan Ranger Act.³⁹ A shortage of volunteers led not only to conscription but a local civilian service designed to be regulated by Confederate officers pursuant to the Confederate Articles of War. These “rangers” operated behind Union lines by gathering intelligence and disrupting Union supply and communications lines, as well as attacking scouting and foraging parties when given the opportunity. Within six months, nearly one hundred ranger units (approximately 6000 men) had been formed and begun operating in, among other places, West Tennessee and southwestern Kentucky.⁴⁰

³⁸ Al Alfaro, “The Paper Trail of the Civil War in Kentucky: 1861-1865,” <https://kynghistory.ky.gov/Our-History/History-of-the-Guard/Documents/ThePaperTrailoftheCivilWarinKY18611865%202.pdf>; Ben H. Severance, *Tennessee’s Radical Army: The State Guard and Its Role in Reconstruction, 1867-1869* (Knoxville: University of Tennessee Press, 2005), 1; Hayes, “The Civil War Years in Obion County,” *Historic Reelfoot Lake Region*, 209-224.

³⁹ Barton A. Myers, “Partisan Ranger Petitions and the Confederacy’s Authorized *Petite Guerre* Service,” in *The Guerrilla Hunters: Irregular Conflicts During the Civil War*, eds. Brian D. McKnight and Barton A. Myers (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 2017), 14.

⁴⁰ Myers, “Partisan Ranger Petitions,” at 17-19.

Ranger units were initially popular but, according to Civil War historian Barton A. Myers, the Ranger Act “led many Southerners to believe that guerrilla warfare in any form was now sanctioned by the Confederate government, making the regulatory purpose of the act difficult, if not impossible, for the War Department to enforce.”⁴¹ As one writer noted, these units were particularly “contentious” in West Tennessee and the Jackson Purchase, where guerrillas “seemingly recruited manpower at will,” and local townsfolk openly aided them even when under fire.⁴² Meanwhile, freelance bands of bushwhackers continued to operate with impunity, as did individual assassins and saboteurs. By early 1864, guerrilla activity had spiraled out of control and the Confederate Congress was forced to repeal the Partisan Ranger Act. Of course, guerrilla activity did not simply end, and attempts to control it were unsuccessful. As Myer’s notes, this irregular warfare resulted in “the proliferation of military atrocity by both sides, hostage taking, executions, plundering, murders of civilians, and a war of punitive measures by the Union army against unruly guerrillas.”⁴³

Indeed, the U. S. War Department “encouraged the formation of ‘home guard units’ in federally occupied areas” to protect communities faced with guerrilla operations. According to Obion County historian David G. Hayes, the primary purpose of these bands, at least in Obion and Fulton Counties, was not to protect local citizens in occupied areas but to capture or kill Confederate soldiers on furlough. Punishment reportedly

⁴¹ Myers, “Partisan Ranger Petitions,” 16.

⁴² Benjamin Franklin Cooling, *Fort Donelson’s Legacy: War and Society in Kentucky and Tennessee, 1862-1863* (Knoxville: University of Tennessee Press, 1997), 284-285.

⁴³ Myers, “Partisan Ranger Petitions,” 30.

extended to those who aided such soldiers. In his book on Reelfoot Lake, Hayes identifies one particular band of Union irregulars, which he claims operated in Obion and Fulton Counties under the direction of a man named J. H. C. Berry from 1863 until near the end of the war. Berry, believed to have been particularly brutal and hated by the locals, was captured and summarily executed in 1865 by a group of “Confederate sympathizers.”⁴⁴

Enflaming Confederate sympathizers even more was the presence of the Union Army’s 2nd Tennessee Heavy Artillery (African Descent), organized at Columbus in June 1863 (designation later changed to 4th United States Colored Heavy Artillery).⁴⁵ As other historians have noted, the presence of black Union troops no doubt incited “increasingly destructive guerrilla insurgency.”⁴⁶ The Union Army’s decision to turn one of its Columbus camps into a large hub for slaves fleeing the southern states deepened local animosity toward the Union presence. The camps sheltered escaped slaves, often referred to as “contraband,” who were given Union Army clothing to wear and thus were often mistaken for Union troops.

In 1863, a conflict between some of these “contraband” and a slaveholding family in Obion County led to the murder of six members of the family, including four young children. Although a military tribunal tried and convicted the contrabands involved in the

⁴⁴ Hayes, *Historic Reelfoot Lake Region*, 235, 248.

⁴⁵“Union Regimental Histories,” American Civil War Archives, drawn from “A Compendium of the War of the Rebellion” by Frederick H. Dyer, <http://www.civilwararchive.com/Unreghst/uscolarty.htm>, accessed Dec. 15, 2020.

⁴⁶ Stephen Rockenbach, “Home Rebels, Amnesty, and Antiguerrilla Operations in Kentucky in 1864,” *Guerrilla Hunters*, ed. McKnight and Myers, 78.

murders (four received life sentences, six were hanged), the white community was never satisfied that justice had been done. As will be discussed later, resentment lingered for many years and led to an incident in 1869 in which vigilantes murdered five former slaves working under the protection of a white planter in Obion County (see Jones farm lynchings at pp. 68-71).⁴⁷

As that 1869 incident suggests, men who had engaged in guerrilla activity did not simply lay down their arms and become law-abiding citizens when the war was over. The men of the Tri-Counties who had been guerrillas continued to operate as guerrillas; others adopted guerrilla tactics that had proved effective during the war. To paraphrase a wider study of violence in America, the men of the Tri-Counties resorted to violence so often during the war and in its aftermath that violence itself became a part of their value structure.⁴⁸ Whether they operated as guerrillas, vigilantes, Klansmen, lynch mobs, or Night Riders, their tactics remained the same. Local authorities were ignored or bypassed; enemies were ambushed; thieves and murderers were executed; even violators of local morality were threatened and, on occasion, whipped.

In the immediate aftermath of the war, numerous Confederate guerrilla bands continued to operate in the Tri-Counties with impunity. These guerrillas harassed and threatened former slaves to keep them from registering to vote, and also targeted

⁴⁷ Hayes, "The Beckham Family Massacre in the Madrid Bend," *Historic Reelfoot Lake Region*, 225-233.

⁴⁸ Hugh Davis Graham and Ted Robert Gurr, *Violence in America, Historical and Comparative Perspectives: A Report to the National Commission on the Causes and Prevention of Violence, June 1969* (New York: Signet Books, 1969), 70.

“Radicals,” those Unionists who continued to view ex-Confederates as traitors.⁴⁹ The most notorious incident occurred on January 11, 1867, when a guerrilla shot and killed a well-known white Tennessee Republican state senator, Dr. Almon Case, in Obion County. It was in fact the second attempt on the senator’s life. A previous attempt on September 24, 1866, had failed but nonetheless resulted in the murder of Case’s 16-year old son.⁵⁰ After Dr. Case’s death, guerrillas continued to threaten his widow and surviving children, and even visitors to their home were subject to ambush. The family eventually moved to Graves County, Kentucky, to avoid further attacks.⁵¹

Republican Governor William G. Brownlow, himself considered a Radical, had begun to contemplate the creation of a state militia in order to “prevent a second civil war.” The murder of State Senator Case strengthened Governor Brownlow’s resolve, and by the end of February 1867, “An Act to Organize and Equip a State Guard” had been signed into law.⁵² Because northwest Tennessee was “overwhelmingly ex-Confederate,” it is not surprising that Governor Brownlow had difficulty recruiting men to his state militia. By mid-March, the combined total of men serving in the State Guard in the area was a fraction of the size of the companies in Middle and East Tennessee.⁵³ The Northwest Tennessee company of the State Guard drew from volunteers in Carroll,

⁴⁹ Severance, *Tennessee’s Radical Army*, 5, 35.

⁵⁰ Hayes, *Historic Reelfoot Lake Region*, 239-240.

⁵¹ Hayes, *Historic Reelfoot Lake Region*, 247.

⁵² Severance, *Tennessee’s Radical Army*, 17-21.

⁵³ Severance, *Tennessee’s Radical Army*, 52.

Gibson, Obion, and Weakley Counties. A second smaller company was formed in McNairy, Hardin, and Humphreys Counties.⁵⁴

The Northwest Tennessee company, led by John T. Robeson, a former Union Army captain from Carroll County, numbered only 110 men and struggled from its inception to maintain order throughout a large region that encompassed four counties. Stationed in Obion County, Robeson informed the governor that his men were under constant attack particularly in Obion County, where, according to Robeson, ex-Confederates were “very bitter.” As Robeson put it in an 1867 letter to fellow officers, “There is very few people who wants the civil law enforced if any in these Counties.”⁵⁵ At one point, Robeson even faced the prospect of repelling an armed insurrection of five hundred men led by an ex-Confederate who threatened chaos at the polls in the 1867 gubernatorial election. Reinforcements from other parts of the State had to be sent to northwest Tennessee to ensure that peace was maintained.⁵⁶

In the aftermath of the 1867 election, the governor and the Tennessee General Assembly disbanded the State Guard even though militia commanders, including Robeson in particular, believed that disbanding the militia “in the face of an armed and dangerous foe only invited more lawlessness.”⁵⁷ Indeed, the governor still considered Obion County one of the most lawless counties in the state, and with good reason: in

⁵⁴ Severance, *Tennessee's Radical Army*, 36-38.

⁵⁵ Severance, *Tennessee's Radical Army*, 158.

⁵⁶ Severance, *Tennessee's Radical Army*, 36, 76-77, 108.

⁵⁷ Severance, *Tennessee's Radical Army*, 174.

November 1869, Willis Jones, a prominent merchant and planter living in Madrid Bend, told an interviewer for the *Memphis Avalanche* that there had been “not less than twenty-five cold-blooded murders” in the area since the end of the war.⁵⁸

The legislature, however, wanted to reduce military spending, and Governor Brownlow acquiesced in the hope that dismantling it would encourage the rebels to desist as well.⁵⁹ Such did not prove to be the case. Shortly after the State Guard was dismantled, the Ku Klux Klan arose to unite vigilante groups under one banner and to beat both Radicals and freedmen into submission. Not surprisingly, Obion County became a Klan stronghold, where, according to historian Ben H. Severance in *Tennessee's Radical Army*, sixty Klansmen “stalked” the area under the leadership of an ex-Confederate named Martin Vowell who had once been arrested by Robeson.⁶⁰ Local historian David Hayes identified two additional Klan units -- one near the Kentucky state line led by Dr. J. M. Alexander, who actually lived on the Kentucky side of the line, and one near Troy led by Henry W. Head, a Confederate veteran.⁶¹

The Klan was also active in Fulton County. In April 1868, an article appeared in the *Hickman Courier* which claimed that a squad of 30-40 Klansmen “from Tennessee” had conducted a raid at State Line Station in Fulton County for the purpose of terrorizing freedmen in the community. In an adjacent column on the same page of the paper, an

⁵⁸ “Wholesale Butchery,” *Tennessean* (Nashville, TN), Nov. 27, 1869.

⁵⁹ Severance, *Tennessee's Radical Army*, 174.

⁶⁰ Severance, *Tennessee's Radical Army*, 176, 177, 206, 188.

⁶¹ Hayes, *Historic Reelfoot Lake Region*, 266.

article, captioned “The Hickman Ku-Klux,” described purported Klan orders that had been posted around town calling for “all the negroes to leave town” and recommending that one white man in particular refrain from employing negroes. The paper’s editor, George Warren, claimed there was no Klan in the county and that the posted orders were just a prank:

Our people have no desire to drive the negro from our midst, or to take any undue advantage of them. Those of them who go to work, attend to their own business, and obey the laws of our State and town, should and will be protected in all their just rights. Our advice to the colored people is to pursue their daily employment quietly and industriously, and to pay no regard to these orders from thoughtless and inconsiderate persons. There is no such thing as a Ku-Klux Klan in Hickman or Fulton County.⁶²

The following week, Warren defined the term “Kuklux Klan” for his readers as a “circle of friends,” whose objective was “perpetuating constitutional liberty.”⁶³ According to Warren, the Klan was a benevolent society “maintained for the protection of Southern people and Southern interest.” The Ku Klux Klan, “if there is such an organization in this part of the country,” was distinguishable from the “well known and notorious Radicals from Obion County,” whom the editor consistently blamed for every threatening action allegedly taken by Klansmen in Fulton County.⁶⁴ George Warren’s defense of the Klan and later his support for vigilante activity seem never to have wavered, and, indeed, subsequent owner/editors followed his lead well into the 20th century.

⁶² “Ku Klux Raid into Kentucky,” and “The Hickman Ku Klux,” *Hickman (KY) Courier*, Apr. 18, 1868.

⁶³ “The Kuklux Klan,” *Hickman Courier*, Apr. 25, 1868.

⁶⁴ “The ‘Regulators,’” *Hickman Courier*, Nov. 21, 1868.

Post-Civil War Racial Conflict in the Tri-Counties

By the early 1870s, the Klan had ceased to exist. The black community as well might have ceased to exist for all the attention paid it by the white community. Without large farms, there was little need for the help of black laborers and tenant farmers. The only exception seems to have been the few plantations located in the rich bottom land which ran from Hickman to Tiptonville on the west side of Reelfoot Lake where tenant farmers and laborers provided a valuable service.

Over the next 50 years, during the period which encapsulates the lynching era in the Tri-Counties, whites largely ignored the blacks who chose to remain in the region. Racial clashes erupted only when whites felt threatened in some way -- either from outside the community or within it. Often it took little more than vague rumors of blacks arming themselves in some other county for whites to react violently.

In the summer of 1874, for example, a racial confrontation occurred between whites and an isolated community of approximately 100 African Americans in southwest Obion County known as Negro Kingdom or Ed-town (so called for its original black landowner, Edmond Jackson). According to David Hayes, there had been rumors in northwest Tennessee counties throughout the summer of 1874 of possible "racial insurrection," and both white and black communities armed themselves accordingly. The political climate had recently changed in Obion County, including the arrival of a new sheriff, and it may be that the new sheriff simply did not get along with the people of Ed-town. Whatever the reason, the entire community, including 18 homes, was burned to the ground that summer, and, as Hayes put it, "no blacks lived in this area of the county for at

least the next one hundred years.” Allegedly, the only landowner who even attempted to return was Edmond Jackson. Jackson is said to have been determined not to abandon his cotton fields. After everyone else had fled, Jackson would return at night to pick his cotton by moonlight. One night, Jackson was shot and killed in his cotton patch by an unknown assailant.⁶⁵ With his death, any remnants of Ed-town ceased to exist.

If burning out a black community was not a clear enough sign of whites’ contempt for African Americans, the white community had no compunction about putting their sentiments in writing. In 1879, the *Tennessean*’s “Regular Correspondent” in Union City printed it for all the world to read:

The ‘Exodus Fever’ has struck the negroes in our town. They had a large convention in the courtroom last night to consider the propriety of migrating to Kansas. Numerous speeches were made by some of the ministers, doctors and schoolteachers of this place, advocating the movement West. *There is but one sentiment among the whites of this town relative to the exodus, and that is that all may go if they wish. We have no desire to keep them here, and think the country, and especially this town, would be greatly benefited if a large number would but exodus somewhere.* About one-half of the negroes of Union City will work and make good citizens, the remainder are a worthless set, degrading to themselves, and, in a great many instances, a nuisance to the community. This country would breathe freer on account of their absence. Hence we say, let the exodus begin, if it only takes this indigent class with it.⁶⁶

⁶⁵ Hayes, *Historic Reelfoot Lake Region*, 282-292.

⁶⁶ “Union City,” *Tennessean*, June 21, 1879 (emphasis added). The black community meeting described in the *Tennessean* reveals that African Americans in Northwest Tennessee were well-aware of the re-emergence of the American Colonization Society and what has been referred to as the Exodus of 1879. See generally Steven Hahn, *A Nation Under Our Feet: Black Political Struggles in the Rural South from Slavery to the Great Migration* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2003).

Interestingly, it was the black professionals in the community who advocated the move westward, which says a great deal about how even the “good citizens” were treated in Union City.

Three years later, the *Hickman Courier* reported a brewing “race conflict” at Sassafras Precinct, a community west of Hickman. On October 13, 1882, the newspaper ran a story which led with speculation that “ill-feeling and the possibility of trouble” had existed for some time in Sassafras, then continued with the story of a neighborhood brawl between a handful of African American men and a handful of white men. The disturbance began when a white teenager named Andrew Shaw, on his way home from Hickman, was approached by a black man named Sid Dixon who “demanded the privilege of riding in the wagon and forced his way into it.” A white man named Lee apparently got into the wagon with Dixon. Both were “under the influence of liquor,” and began arguing with each other, which led to Dixon striking Lee with a whisky jug. Shaw got out of the wagon and refused to go on, “but the negro threatened to kill him unless he would drive the wagon.” Shaw continued until he reached the next farm, where he stopped to ask for help. A fight broke out at the farm involving a number of white men and Dixon, although it finally ended without anyone being seriously injured. Several days later another fight occurred at a local mill where Dixon was employed. This time Dixon and two African American men attacked one of the white men from the earlier fight, and Dixon allegedly said “something to the effect that the colored men were in the majority and were going to stand together against the whites.” Again, no one was

hurt, but the encounters continued and eventually, the white men got warrants against the black men, and, with the assistance of several law enforcement officers, formed a posse to pursue Dixon “and his squad.” When the posse finally caught up with them, gunfire was exchanged and several black men were shot, though no one was killed. One of the black men, Lewis Wisdom, who was a minor figure in the confrontation, was captured and placed under arrest, and the *Courier* claimed that he was in “very great danger” of being taken from the jail and lynched. Indeed, the *Courier* seemed to be trying to enflame the white community by presenting the matter as a “race conflict,” and suggesting that Wisdom might be lynched.⁶⁷

The day after the *Courier* ran its story, a vastly different version of the same conflict appeared in the *New York Times*. The *Times* headline read, “Persecuting The Black Man, The Shot-Gun Again In Use Among The Kentucky Bourbons,” and the story began: “A startling story of outrage and persecution comes from Hickman, small town in the extreme south west of [Kentucky].” According to the *Times*, “The most bitter hostility has been manifested toward the negroes by the Bourbons for a long time, and lately it has broken out into a guerrilla warfare that is resulting seriously, and, in some cases, fatally, to the blacks.” The article recounts many of the same basic facts but, unlike the *Courier*’s version, is told from the perspective of the African Americans involved. The *Times* reported:

It is stated that the whole country is filled with men armed with rifles and shot-guns, in pursuit of the negroes, and the latter have

⁶⁷ “Scrimmage Between Whites And Blacks, A Race Conflict Threatened,” *Hickman Courier*, Oct. 13, 1882.

been buying quantities of powder and shot, and making every preparation for a vigorous defense.

In this version of the story, it was Edwards who initially abused and beat Dixon “terribly.” Not satisfied with the beating, Edwards then said he was going to “kill the ---- black [n-----] and all his gang and was going after his gun.” Dixon, along with six other black men, hid in the woods, but Edwards returned with “14 white ruffians, armed to the teeth,” and went after their quarry. The blacks eluded the whites for two days but were finally discovered. Although they did not resist, “the whites leveled their guns and fired, severely wounding two of the negroes.” All of them ran, but, as Dixon was going over a fence, he was shot between the shoulders and fell dead. Another badly wounded man was discovered the following day. According to the *Times*, “The negroes are well known in Hickman, and have generally been thought of as quiet and peaceable citizens.”⁶⁸

The *Hickman Courier*, always eager to defend the local white community, published a follow-up story in its next weekly edition. “Very exaggerated reports” had been published in “some of the leading Republican papers,” which deserved to be corrected. The *Courier* claimed that every step taken by Edwards and his posse had been taken within the law and that whites had demonstrated “discretion, prudence and law abiding spirit.” The paper described the trouble as having originated with a “misguided colored squad” who had opened fire into a group of whites and that “the whites instead of yielding to their natural feelings of revenge, took wiser counsel” and secured warrants before attempting to arrest “the colored offenders.” In a tortured rhetorical device which

⁶⁸ “Persecuting The Black Man, The Shot-Gun Again In Use Among The Kentucky Bourbons,” *New York Times*, Oct. 14, 1882.

suggested the opposite of what the paper intended, the writer said, “What less could the citizens of any community have done? In fact, would not some communities, instead of resorting to the processes of the law, have taken the law into their own hands and [concentrated] on their own feelings of revenge.”

The *Courier* denied “published reports” that two blacks had been killed and one white man wounded. Without providing any sources, the *Courier* proclaimed, “That is a mistake. There was no one killed and no one wounded. There was a mule wounded by the fire from the blacks, but with this exception there was not a drop of blood shed.” The paper’s final word: “[T]he summing up of facts stand, no body killed, no body wounded, nobody hurt, and one colored man in jail tried and convicted for carrying concealed a deadly weapon.”⁶⁹ With that, the “Race Conflict” announced a week earlier by the *Hickman Courier* came to a conclusion.

Significantly, neither the 1874 destruction of Ed-town in Obion County nor the 1882 “race conflict” in Fulton County occurred during a period of increased lynching activity in the area. These events do, however, illustrate the pervasive hostility toward African Americans in the latter part of the 19th century. During this period and into the early 20th century, the *Hickman Courier* reinforced the hostility by encouraging its white readers to take the law into their own hands when necessary to keep African Americans removed from the mainstream of southern white society. As racial segregation began to be codified by state law and attempts were made to roll back federal constitutional

⁶⁹ “The Race Conflict, Every Step Taken Within The Law,” *Hickman Courier*, Oct. 20, 1882.

provisions, a series of articles published in the fall and early winter of 1906 made the point with little attempt at subtlety.

On October 5, 1906, the *Hickman Courier* published an editorial entitled “The Negro Problem.” Using reports of assaults on white women in Atlanta and Mobile as their point of departure, the editors declared:

The time has come when the law shall have no hand in the punishment of [sexual assault] crimes, for legal or any other kind has no effect on the heinous scoundrels. The time has come when our womanhood is in jeopardy, and when her rights are no longer hers, and her virtue no longer safe. This is caused by the repeated assaults on white women throughout the south almost every day that passes. When this state of affairs exists, as it now does, it is time for something to be done, if the hands of the law can have no effect, then something else **MUST** be done that **WILL** have effect.

Still couched in terms of the assault on Southern womanhood, the *Courier* then seemed to broaden the scope of its opinion:

Now the negro has a place and in this place he must stay, and if he does not stay in his place, woe unto him. . . . Let the negro know his place and keep it; for it is a settled fact that the south has contended with so much that they **WILL** show him his place and without needless preliminaries.⁷⁰

These concluding sentences went to the heart of the matter. The issue of sexual assaults on white women was merely the buildup for the larger inflection point: African Americans should know their place, away from white society, and stay there.

A month later, on November 2, 1906, the newspaper ran a story about the governor of Mississippi, James Kimble Vardaman, who was leading a campaign to repeal

⁷⁰ “The Negro Problem,” *Hickman Courier*, Oct. 5, 1906 (emphasis in original).

the Fifteenth Amendment of the U. S. Constitution. Governor Vardaman was quoted as saying a “crisis” was at hand, which should be “settled at once.” The crisis was “a problem of white supremacy or black domination.” How blacks could achieve domination was not addressed; the real issue was maintaining white supremacy. He spoke in racist code of the dangers of allowing blacks to even mingle with whites: “negroes in the South are becoming more criminal every day,” “more disrespectful of law and more animal like in their character and desires.” Legal equality under the law fostered a desire for “social equality,” and that was simply not acceptable.⁷¹

Shortly after the Vardaman article appeared, the *Hickman Courier* posted a front-page editorial in which the editors argued that “the North” had imposed federal laws designed “to reverse human conditions and natural laws” which effectively reordered the social and political fabric of the South. The North, still naive to the ways of African Americans, simply did not yet understand what the South faced: “[T]he difference between the Negroes of the North and the Negroes of the South is as the difference between semi-civilization and total barbarism.” In somewhat opaque language, the editors claimed that the effort to make African Americans “exceptional” was “evil” and an exercise in misguided philanthropy. Blacks in the South should be expected to rise or fall on their own.⁷²

In another editorial published on March 8, 1907, the *Hickman Courier* continued to fulminate about “the negro problem.” While acknowledging that “as a rule the

⁷¹ “Fifteenth Amendment Must Go Says Vardaman,” *Hickman Courier*, Nov. 2, 1906.

⁷² “The Race Question,” *Hickman Courier*, Dec. 7, 1906.

negroes of [Hickman] are peaceable and law abiding,” the editors claimed there were many who were not. “They spend their time day in and day out loafing upon the streets, blocking the passage to the depot, spitting upon the walks and leering at ladies who are forced to crowd past them on the highways.” According to the editors, “[t]he evil is getting too general and the sooner something is done toward eliminating the evil, the better.”⁷³ The following year, in November 1908, Fulton night policeman Lee Carter shot and killed Jesse Owsley, a black man, who was attempting to evade arrest. Carter shot Owsley as Owsley was running away from him. The *Hickman Courier’s* editors sounded gleeful: “A few examples like this will teach the negro ruffian not to run from an officer.”⁷⁴ Evil was being eliminated.

The *Hickman Courier’s* editors were not alone in their views. In early September 1908, the *Courier* reported an incident in which John Maxwell, a white freight conductor for the Illinois Central, attempted to “eject” a black man “known by the name Charley Snow” from the train between Fulton and McConnell, Tennessee. The men exchanged gunfire with Snow shooting Maxwell five times and Maxwell striking Snow with three shots. Maxwell survived, but Snow, who had been taken to jail in Union City, died the same night. On September 25, 1908, the Paducah *News-Democrat* reported that “five dead negroes” had been found along the railroad between Fulton and Cairo, Illinois, within the past few weeks “all with bullet holes in them.” The *News-Democrat* commented with apparent approval: “It would appear that railroaders are becoming

⁷³ Uncaptioned editorial, *Hickman Courier*, Mar. 8, 1907.

⁷⁴ “Officer Killed Negro,” *Hickman Courier*, Nov. 19, 1908.

tired of the wholesale slaughter of conductors and employees by negro bums.” The *Hickman Courier* carried the *News-Democrat’s* comment.⁷⁵

This September 25, 1908 report hit the local and regional newspapers just one week before the occurrence of the worst lynching incident ever in the history of the Tri-Counties, when men known as Night Riders attacked the home of David Walker, set fire to his house, and shot him, along with his wife and two of his children, as they ran to escape the flames. Unlike Night Riders elsewhere in western Kentucky, the group was predominantly from Obion County and, as discussed later in this paper, had not previously been focussed on terrorizing the African American community but on preserving hunting and fishing rights around Reelfoot Lake. This particular band of Night Riders was broken up in the winter of 1908-1909 as the result of its lynching of a white man on the shores of Reelfoot Lake. It was not, however, to be the end of night riding in the Tri-Counties. After a seven-year hiatus, it returned to the region in 1915 specifically for the purpose of terrorizing blacks.

This second wave of night riding, like the first, was driven by economic factors. The beginning of World War I in Europe initially had a profound effect upon cotton production in the South. On February 4, 1915, the *Hickman Courier* reported that the U. S. Department of Agriculture was requiring at least a 10% reduction in cotton acreage for 1915.⁷⁶ While cotton farms in the Tri-Counties were relatively small, the larger farms

⁷⁵ “Deadly Fight on Train,” *Hickman Courier*, Sept. 3, 1908; “Dead Negroes,” *News-Democrat* (Paducah, KY), Sept. 25, 1908; “Dead Negroes Found,” *Hickman Courier*, Oct. 1, 1908.

⁷⁶ “Cotton Acreage -- Cut Down Ten Percent,” *Hickman Courier*, Feb. 4, 1915.

and plantations in the bottoms along the Mississippi River in Lake County and Fulton County undoubtedly felt the effects of market shifts. Known familiarly as “the bottoms,” this is the area of the Tri-Counties which had the most in common with the Mississippi Delta.

In early February 1915, reports of night riding resurfaced in the bottoms along the Mississippi River. The *Hickman Courier* described the joint Kentucky/Tennessee issue:

Throughout the length, and to some extent its breath [sic], the lower bottom from Hickman almost to Tiptonville has been in the throes of unrest and dissatisfaction for several months past, resulting from friction between the white and negro inhabitants of the section involved.⁷⁷

The *Courier* said there had been “various manifestations of lawlessness very recently.” Notices had been posted “warning negro tenants of the bottom to leave, while in many instances negro cabins were shot into with an utter disregard of consequences.” In particular, night riders had shot into tenant houses on the plantations of W. J. Harper and W. C. Tipton, and at least one tenant had been wounded. A local man, who had been approached about joining the night riders, informed on them, which led to at least one arrest and the issuance of 15 warrants. The *Courier-Journal* noted in its story about the arrest warrants that night riding troubles had been prevalent in the area “for the last two years” and that there had been “numerous outbreaks” of white men who objected “to the presence of the negroes.” The *Courier-Journal* article reported that the African American community was in a state of “abject terror, while the plantations owners generally are

⁷⁷ “Trouble at Hickman,” *Paducah Sun-Democrat*, Feb. 16, 1915; “Sixteen Arrested on Nightrider Charge,” *Hickman Courier*, Feb. 18, 1915.

alarmed lest their negro tenants may be scared away and they will be left without help to conduct their farming operations.”⁷⁸

At the same time, black labor forces as well as black tenant farmers were being harassed just across the river near New Madrid, Missouri. On February 9, 1915, a government levee contractor found a large placard nailed to a tree which read: “There is enough white men in this section to do all this work and the G--d--negroes had better get away and that quick and the ‘boss’ had better move too.” In place of a signature the writer had drawn a shotgun.

Threats were also being issued directly to black farmers, and nearly 300 had already complied with more departures expected.⁷⁹ The entire situation came to a boiling point when reports were published stating that night riders from southern Missouri had joined forces with the Lake County riders and “each night skiff loads of men can be seen

⁷⁸ “Trouble at Hickman,” *Paducah Sun-Democrat*, Feb. 16, 1915; “‘Night Rider’ Warrants Issued at Hickman,” *Courier-Journal* (Louisville, KY), Feb. 17, 1915.

⁷⁹ “Nightriders Again Warn Levee Negroes,” *Hickman Courier*, Feb. 11, 1915; “Riders Warn Contractors,” *Paducah Sun-Democrat*, Feb. 13, 1915; “Nightriders Busy at New Madrid,” *Hickman Courier*, Feb. 25, 1915; “Night Riders Fire on Negroes,” *Lancaster (PA) Examiner*, Feb. 24, 1915.

crossing the Mississippi River to aid their Tennessee comrades in carrying on threats and depredations.”⁸⁰

In mid-February, approximately 100 citizens of Lake County signed a written appeal to Tennessee’s governor to send militia “to protect them from ‘night riders’” who continued to threaten the black tenant farmers and white cotton producers in the county. According to news reports, riders had begun flogging African American farmers in order to drive them out of the county: “The jails at Hickman, Ky., Tiptonville and Union City, Tenn., and other places are filled with suspects and eighteen of them are known to be members of gangs who last whipped a whole negro family after the man had signed up to rent land at an increased rental over 1914.”⁸¹

In particular, the communities of Titan and Phillippi (also known as “No. 9 Bottom”) in Lake County were purportedly under attack. The governor authorized the Lake County sheriff to deputize as many men as possible to get the situation under control. Failing that, he was prepared to order the militia stationed at Union City to move

⁸⁰ “Nightriders Are Terrorizing State, Tennessee Governor Called Upon to Send Troops to Reelfoot Lake,” *Fort Wayne (IN) News*, Feb. 24, 1915; “May Call Militia,” *Hutchinson (KS) News*, Feb. 24, 1915. Night riding in early 1915 was also reported in Sikeston and Clarkton, MO; Blytheville and Prescott, AR; Stewart and Weakley Counties in TN; and Muhlenburg, Butler, Caldwell, Christian, Hopkins, and Ohio Counties in KY. All of these incidents of night riding in 1915 were for the express purpose of terrorizing black communities -- particularly black tenant farmers and laborers competing with whites for jobs. In the Kentucky counties listed here, the night riders actually called themselves “possum hunters.” Some were eventually convicted of their crimes. See, e.g., “Prosecution Busy in Possum Hunter Cases,” *Tennessean*, Sept. 6, 1915; “70 Night Riders Indicted in Ky.” *Tampa (FL) Tribune*, Aug. 27, 1915.

⁸¹ “Nightriders Are Terrorizing State, Tennessee Governor Called Upon to Send Troops to Reelfoot Lake,” *Fort Wayne (IN) News*, Feb. 24, 1915.

into Tiptonville.⁸² Within a day's time, the confession of an 18-year old boy led to the arrests of a number of men "alleged to be ringleaders" in Fulton County. Following a preliminary hearing in Hickman at which 50 witnesses reportedly testified, the Fulton County grand jury indicted eighteen men. The large landowners, "[w]ho reside in [Hickman] and who own most of the large plantations below here where the troubles arose," were said to be "very much pleased with the results . . . and feel that they will not have any further disturbances." As in most instances which affected the African American community, the people most disturbed by the actions of the night riders did not -- or were not asked to -- comment.⁸³

On September 23, 1915, the *Hickman Courier*, in its report on recent Circuit Court activity, noted that the night rider cases had been "filed away," meaning without disposition. No explanation was provided and there is no further record of the cases in the *Courier*, nor were there any further newspaper reports of Night Rider activity in the region.⁸⁴

The Legacy of the Confederacy

Throughout the post-Civil War period of racial conflict described in the previous section, the Confederacy thrived in the Tri-Counties' collective memory. By 1910, the

⁸² "Militia Asked," *Courier-Journal*, Feb. 25, 1915; uncaptioned news item, *Nebraska State Journal* (Lincoln, NE), Feb. 25, 1915.

⁸³ "Alleged 'Night Riders' Are Held To Answer . . . Charged with Confederating to Intimidate Negroes," *Courier-Journal*, Feb. 23, 1915; "13 'Nightriders' Are Bound Over," *Hickman Courier*, Feb. 25, 1915. Five men waived their right to a preliminary hearing; 13 men asked for a hearing and were "bound over" to the grand jury, who subsequently indicted all 18 defendants.

⁸⁴ "Grind of the Court," *Hickman Courier*, Sept. 23, 1915.

country was two generations removed from the Civil War; yet the children of the region's many Confederate soldiers and guerrillas embraced the "Lost Cause" with reverential fervor. Well into the second decade of the 20th century and beyond, Civil War veterans and their families participated in elaborate local and regional reunions. In June 1901, the *Hickman Courier* reported that nearly 2,500 members of the United Confederate Veterans' association had met recently in Memphis. The story quoted a section from a report of the historical committee (unanimously adopted), which emphasized the enduring "passions and prejudices" created by sectional division:

Probably the generation now passing away will never completely outlive the prejudice engendered by the war, and contentions and misapprehensions which led to it. The passions and prejudices aroused by the war threatened to implant sectional animosities which time could never heal.⁸⁵

In June 1906, the *Union City Commercial Courier* reported that Confederate veterans groups in West Tennessee had decided to stage "a real imitation of a battle," accompanied by "the old 'Rebel yell' that always struck terror in the breasts of the Yankees," for the benefit of their children and grandchildren. Referred to as "The Great Sham Battle," the event was held on July 3, 1906, at the fairgrounds in Union City, and was a "reproduction of one of the brilliant victories of peerless cavalry leader, Gen. Nathan B. Forrest." In March 1908, the *Hickman Courier* carried a lengthy front page story headlined, "A Little Story of Confederate Gallantry; and Unassuming Heroes of the Lost Cause Who Dwell Among Us." At the annual Confederate reunion in Memphis in 1909, the singing of "Dixie," with its reminder that "old times there are not

⁸⁵ "Confederates Meet," *Hickman Courier*, June 7, 1901.

forgotten,” was reported to have swept “the Great Gathering” off its feet. And, in 1911, when the annual national Confederate Veterans reunion was held at Little Rock, the Union City *Commercial Courier* carried an article from the *Arkansas Democrat* which included a summary of remarks made by a keynote speaker who “paid a beautiful tribute to the old South, and declared that . . . its greatest and best accomplishments for society . . . will be forever laid on the sterling principles of honor and devotion to country manifested by the citizenship of the old South.” The story also noted that the speaker paid tribute to the Klan for its role in preserving the safety and wellbeing of the South’s women and children:

The Ku-Klux Klan, with its protection of society and the home, was paid a high and lasting tribute by the speaker, who said that but for this timely organization among the patriotic men of the South, the few remaining homes in the Southland and the very lives of the women and children of Dixie were in imminent danger from the unruly negroes and the still more despicable carpet-baggers.⁸⁶

As that statement reflects, Confederate values and Klan values were entwined in their “honor and devotion to country.” Veterans and their families who participated in these reunions glorified not only the “gallantry” of the Lost Cause, but white supremacy and the attendant violence necessary to maintain that supremacy.

The wives and daughters of the Confederacy played their own unique role in advancing white supremacy through their commemoration of the “Lost Cause.”

⁸⁶ “To Confederate Veterans,” *Commercial Courier*, June 29, 1906; “A Little Story of Confederate Gallantry; and Unassuming Heroes of the Lost Cause Who Dwell Among Us,” *Hickman Courier*, Mar. 6, 1908; “Confederate Reunion -- Tears And Cheers Greet The Old Heroes,” *Hickman Courier*, June 17, 1909; “Confederate Reunion,” *Commercial Courier*, June 2, 1911.

Honoring the Lost Cause became, in fact, the *raison d'être* for three chapters of the United Daughters of Confederacy in Obion County and two chapters in Fulton County. In November 1900, the *Hickman Courier* carried an article about the U.D.C.'s national convention in which the organization's president "called upon those present to educate their children as true Southerners, in the full knowledge of the war and the causes that led up to it . . . 'They should be taught why their fathers gave up everything, even life itself, for the principles involved.'" At a Confederates' reunion in Obion County in 1904, which drew a crowd of 3,000, a speaker for the Leonidas Polk Chapter of the U.D.C. welcomed the veterans and stated the objectives of the U.D.C. as part of her remarks. Those objectives included perpetuating "the memory of those who fought for a cause they knew to be right and just," and instilling "in the minds of succeeding generations the high principles of patriotism."⁸⁷

The highest achievement of these chapters was the Confederate memorials for which each chapter's members raised funds. The grandest of these was a \$10,000 memorial gateway, unveiled on November 7, 1913, and dedicated to the memory of the Confederate soldiers buried in Hickman's City Cemetery. In keeping with the U.D.C.'s

⁸⁷ "True to the South, Mothers Are Urged to Teach Their Children the Causes of the Civil War," *Hickman Courier*, Nov. 23, 1900; "Soldiers in Gray, Thousands of Veterans Gather at Reunion Friday and Saturday," *Commercial Courier*, Oct. 14, 1904.

objectives, “young ladies” performed the unveiling, followed by the placing of wreaths by “little boys and girls.”⁸⁸

The effect of the U.D.C.’s efforts was evident in a “sketch of Hickman” written by a young woman as part of an assignment for one of her English classes at Stuart Hall, a boarding school in Staunton, Virginia, named for the widow of Confederate hero J. E. B. Stuart. Her essay was printed in full by the *Hickman Courier* in December 1910. In it, she portrayed Hickman as the idyllic southern town, steeped in plantation culture, both pre- and post-Civil War. Her description, although far from local reality, echoed the antebellum reverie popularized in romantic literature of the period:

The country life on these big farms was especially attractive—to me no more charming state of existence could be imagined than the life of this countryside. . . . Each plantation was tilled and cared for by its numerous slaves—not like the negroes of today, but dear, faithful, honest black people who loved ‘massa’ and ‘missus’ and de chillun’ better than anything else on earth and who will always hold a very loving, tender spot in the hearts of all Southern people who knew them as they were.

She also described the privations of the war and the resurgence of Hickman in the years that followed. People in her own time and place, she claimed, retained “their tender loving memories of the ‘Lost Cause’ and their devotion to the sunny ‘Dixie Land,’” as well as the gentility and gallantry of their forebearers:

⁸⁸ “Dedicate Gateway. Elaborate Ceremony Planned by U.D.C. at Hickman,” *Commercial Courier*, Nov. 7, 1913; Gateway Is Dedicated. U.D.C. at Hickman, Ky., Have \$10,000 Memorial Gift,” *Commercial Courier*, Nov. 14, 1913. Karen L. Cox highlights the U.D.C.’s role in championing Confederate culture in her book, *Dixie’s Daughters: The United Daughters of the Confederacy and the Preservation of Confederate Culture* (Gainesville: University Press of Florida, 2003).

I really wonder if the hearts of all Hickman people are not made of gold. *Above all things they are honorable in every sense of the word*, for they believe firmly that *a gentleman is not a gentleman without unsullied and unstained honor*. Chivalry, as in the days of old, exists in its purest form, and womanhood is held sacred and honored in a beautiful way to see.⁸⁹

Violence and the White Male Code of Conduct

If chivalry and honor were so highly valued in the Tri-Counties, they nonetheless walked hand in hand with lawlessness and violence. Between 1869 and 1931, a total of 57 people were lynched in the Tri-Counties. Only six of them were white. Thirty-one men, including five white men, were lynched in Obion County; twelve were lynched in Lake County; and fourteen, including a woman and two children, were lynched in Fulton County. All those lynchings occurred within the lifetime of men who had fought in the Civil War or participated in the guerrilla activity that accompanied it. In Obion County, where most of the guerrilla activity had taken place, there were only four lynchings after 1900; and, although there were a number of lynchings in both Lake and Fulton Counties during the next 10 years, there were only a total of four lynchings in the Tri-Counties after 1910.

⁸⁹ "My Old Kentucky Home," *Hickman Courier*, Dec. 15, 1910 (emphasis added). Anne E. Marshall explores the creation of Kentucky's "racially innocent golden age of landed aristocracy" in her book, *Creating a Confederate Kentucky: The Lost Cause and Civil War Memory in a Border State* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2010), 144. One chapter in particular focuses on the impact of romantic literature. See Chapter 6, "A Place Full of Colored People, Pretty Girls, and Polite Men: Literature, Confederate Identity, and Kentucky's Reputation, 1890-1915," 133-154. See generally David W. Blight, *Race and Reunion: The Civil War in American Memory* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2001).

Violence in the Tri-Counties was not limited to racial encounters or to lynchings. Indeed, the entire culture was saturated in violence. The violence of the Civil War and its aftermath built upon the white male code of conduct, explored fully by Bertram Wyatt-Brown in his highly regarded book, *Southern Honor: Ethics & Behavior in the Old South*.⁹⁰ As his title suggests, the code of conduct could be summarized in the word “honor.” Honor was a democratic principle which united all southern white men with little regard for social rank or wealth. Honorable conduct required a willingness to resort to violence -- even killing -- as a means of ensuring that honor was preserved. Not only did honor transcend class differences in most respects, it also transcended the law, and often the law gave way to personal honor.

Shoot-outs among white men were such an everyday occurrence that they were referred to merely as “shooting scrapes,” and even homicide was commonplace well into the twentieth century. In a short treatise written in 1888, entitled *Homicide, North and South*, author H. V. Redfield, Washington bureau chief for the *Cincinnati Commercial* newspaper, noted that the number of murders in Kentucky and throughout the border states was astonishingly high, particularly between whites. Redfield quoted the presiding bishop of the Episcopal Church in America as saying that the number of unpunished homicides in the bishop’s adopted state of Kentucky “was dreadful.” As Presiding Bishop Smith put it, “The law is recognized only as a shield to protect the prisoner from the consequences of the law.” Redfield believed this to be “the key to the whole

⁹⁰ Bertram Wyatt-Brown, *Southern Honor: Ethics & Behavior in the Old South*, 25th ann. ed. (New York: Oxford University Press, 2007).

difficulty in the Southern States. Murder is not regarded with sufficient horror, and the disposition is to be lenient with men-slayers.”⁹¹

Without a true planter class, class differences were downplayed throughout the region, but they did play a role in the conduct of those who engaged in violence in at least one respect. In a region dominated by agricultural concerns, there were two broad social categories: there were farm or plantation owners and their foremen; and there were tenant farmers and laborers. In the former group were the men who, after they had shot and killed a man, went immediately to the sheriff’s office and turned themselves in with full confidence that they would be exonerated. Homicides by members of this group invariably led to dismissals or acquittals. The Darnall-Watson feud, made famous by Mark Twain in his book, *Life on the Mississippi*, is one such example.⁹² The feud, involving rivalries between the Darnall and Watson families, came to a head in March 1869 when members of the Darnall family murdered three men aligned with the Watsons. Henry J. Darnall, a wealthy landowner and head of the Darnall family, was one of the shooters responsible for those deaths. Darnall was tried for the murders and acquitted. Five years later, Darnall shot and killed two other men in a gun battle precipitated by a business dispute. Darnall’s prosecution for the homicides ended in a mistrial and the case was never retried. Violence however followed Darnall throughout his life. Though he

⁹¹ H. V. Redfield, *Homicide, North and South: Being a Comparative View of Crime Against the Person in Several Parts of the United States* (Philadelphia: J. B. Lippincott & Co., 1880), 55,57-58, 61-62. See also Ohio State Press website at <https://ohiostatepress.org/books/BookPages/RedfieldHomicide.html> for reference to *Homicide* as an exemplar of nineteenth-century studies on violence.

⁹² Hayes, *Historic Reelfoot Lake Region* (quoting from Mark Twain, *Life on the Mississippi*), 269.

consistently escaped punishment for his crimes and died peacefully at home in 1880, his children were not as fortunate: three of his four sons were victims of homicide in unrelated incidents between 1865 and 1901.⁹³

In other examples extending into the early twentieth century, a white man named Charles Stroud was acquitted in 1908 on grounds of self defense after a fight led to a killing over the digging of a well, and R. R. Rogers was exonerated by a coroner's jury in 1908 after a shooting over fishing rights at a small pond. In 1910, S. L. Dodds, a prominent plantation owner, shot and killed a white man named Lester French who had whipped one of Dodds's black employees. Dodds had French arrested; French threatened Dodds; Dodds shot and killed French; and the charges were dismissed following a preliminary hearing. In each instance, the shooter turned himself into the sheriff on the same day the incident occurred.⁹⁴ By their actions, these men set a standard for white men willing to take the law into their own hands, and their example may have served as encouragement even to those who chose to do their killing as part of a mob.

The other group, the tenant farmers and laborers, tended to get into shooting scrapes during or after social events. Unlike the examples above, this kind of shooting could lead to short prison sentences. The men in this group seem to have embodied the fraternal spirit described by Wyatt-Brown when he spoke of the need to "preserve white

⁹³ Hayes, "The Darnall-Watson Feud of the Madrid Bend," *Historic Reelfoot Lake Region*, 268-279. One of the men killed by Darnall was Albert Nall, friend of Willis Jones, who is discussed on p. 68, *infra*, in connection with the 1869 lynchings at Madrid Bend. See Hayes, *Historic Reelfoot Lake Region*, 262.

⁹⁴ "Stroud is Acquitted," *Hickman Courier*, Oct. 1, 1908; "Rogers Kills Kesterson," *Hickman Courier*, Nov. 5, 1908; "Lester French Killed . . . Tragedy Result of Threats Made By Victim," *Hickman Courier*, July 19, 1910.

manhood and personal status in the fraternity of the male tribe” to which all white men belonged regardless of rank.⁹⁵ Examples are numerous. Many appear to have been deeply personal. In July 1876, a white man, angry over a disputed debt, and with the help of two friends, dragged another white man off his horse near the state line between Lake and Fulton Counties and beat him severely with clubs before shooting him and leaving him to die in the road.⁹⁶ In October 1881, the *Memphis Daily Appeal* reported that a white man had stabbed another white man during church in Obion County.⁹⁷ In June 1883, there was a shootout on the streets of Fulton between the town marshal and four brothers named Ogle. The Ogles, who were being “exceedingly boisterous and turbulent,” resisted arrest and in the gun battle which followed, one of the Ogles was killed and another seriously wounded. The marshal was badly beaten and several bystanders were shot, including an elderly black man who later died.⁹⁸ In January 1891, a white man killed another white man by striking him on the head with a mallet at a local sawmill.⁹⁹ In September 1895, a white man who had been “scandalizing” another man’s wife was shot dead “with two loads from a double barrel shotgun” by the husband. Both were “reputable young farmers” living near Reelfoot Lake.¹⁰⁰

⁹⁵ Wyatt-Brown, *Southern Honor*, 369.

⁹⁶ “Bloody Work,” *Hickman Courier*, Aug. 11, 1876.

⁹⁷ “Tennessee,” *Memphis (TN) Daily Appeal*, Oct. 6, 1881.

⁹⁸ “Bloody Affair at Fulton,” *Hickman Courier*, June 15, 1883.

⁹⁹ Uncaptioned news item, *Hickman Courier*, Jan. 16, 1891.

¹⁰⁰ Uncaptioned news item, *Hickman Courier*, Sept. 13, 1895.

Fighting among these men often took the form of a free-for-all at a country store or at a social gathering where drinking was usually involved. For example, in June 1915, three Hickman police officers were involved in a shoot-out at a “cider joint” owned by Bert Wallace during which at least 30 shots were fired. The shoot-out ended only because the police officers ran out of ammunition. They were chased back to the jailhouse by Wallace and his customer Claude Johnson, who continuing firing on them as they ran.¹⁰¹ Wallace had already been tried for murder in 1910 and for malicious shooting just a month before the June 1915 incident. Although no one was seriously injured, it was a harbinger of things to come. In August 1915, a political debate among acquaintances at Walter Allison’s store on Sassafras Ridge near the bottoms led to the death of both Allison and Bert Wallace. Allison had recently been the shooter in an incident at an ice cream supper in which he accidentally shot a woman who had thrown herself between Allison and “some man” Allison was trying to shoot.¹⁰² When Sam Cleaves began “yelling for his candidate for circuit judge,” W. J. Johnson hit Cleaves in the mouth with a soda bottle. Wallace tried to intervene but Chester Stowe grabbed Wallace and pushed him out of the store. Wallace went home, got his gun, and came back shooting. He fatally wounded Walter Allison, and, in return, Walter’s brother Oscar shot and killed Wallace on the spot.¹⁰³

¹⁰¹ “Thirty Shots Exchanged, One Officer Hit,” *Hickman Courier*, June 10, 1915.

¹⁰² The innocent sounding “ice cream supper” seems frequently to have provided the opportunity for whites to stab and shoot each other. See “John Tanner Killed,” *Hickman Courier*, May 8, 1908; “Guns and Knives Used,” *Hickman Courier*, Aug. 27, 1908.

¹⁰³ “One Killed; Three Wounded, “Election Day Fight, Two Miles Below Hickman,” *Hickman Courier*, Aug. 12, 1915.

In September 1915, another shoot-out occurred. In this one, Frank Collins had accused Claude Johnson of giving alcohol to his eighteen year old son, Willie Collins. Johnson confronted Willie's father, and, in the ensuing battle, Willie Collins and Johnson were both killed. Deputy Sheriff (and former county judge) W. A. Naylor was also killed.¹⁰⁴ And, in November 1915, Lonnie Johnson shot and killed Chester Stowe, who was himself under indictment for murder at the time of his death. The murder occurred at the home of W. T. Johnson, a plantation foreman and Lonnie's uncle. Lonnie Johnson was charged with murder, and W. T. Johnson was charged with aiding and abetting Lonnie.¹⁰⁵

Later, in April 1916, W. T. Johnson was found unconscious "in a pool of blood" near a local store, his face having been slashed and his throat cut "almost from ear to ear." The *Hickman Courier* described the incident as a fight in which two men apparently got the better of Johnson. Johnson survived, and Coop Bradshaw, "a well-to-do and well-known farmer," was tried and convicted for nearly killing Johnson. His punishment was six months in jail and a \$150 fine.¹⁰⁶

¹⁰⁴ "Three Shot to Death; One Wounded," *Hickman Courier*, Sept. 16, 1915.

¹⁰⁵ "Two Johnsons Bound Over To Circuit Court," *Hickman Courier*, Nov. 25, 1915.

¹⁰⁶ "W. T. Johnson Injured In Cutting Scrape," *Hickman Courier*, Apr. 6, 1916; "Oscar Allison Is Held To Be Innocent," *Hickman Courier*, June 4, 1916.

On November 25, 1915, the *Hickman Courier* reported that there had been 12 homicides in Fulton County in the past 3 1/2 months.¹⁰⁷ Most of those homicides involved white men killing white men. The community blamed the violence on bootlegging.¹⁰⁸ Regardless of the cause, none of these white men, nor scores of others not discussed here, were ever subjected to lethal punishment. Until well after the turn of the century, the only whites who were severely punished for murder were white criminals who committed felony murder, that is, murder committed in the course of committing

¹⁰⁷ "Two Negroes Killed in Bottom Shooting Scrape," *Hickman Courier*, Nov. 25, 1915 (the two men shot each other). See additional uncaptioned *Hickman Courier* docket reports for the year published on Apr. 29, 1915, May 13, 1915, June 10, 1915, Jan. 6, 1916, and June 15, 1916. The Apr. 29 report in particular highlights the prevalence of violence in the community. In addition to cases discussed in this paper, the docket included 22 bootlegging cases, 11 weapons charges, 2 illegal shooting cases, a murder case, and 2 charges for "detaining a woman." The May 13 report is notable for including two intraracial black murders: Ellen Knowles was indicted for killing her husband with a small tree, and Joe Brown who had killed "Red" Foster over a craps game was sentenced to 6 years and 1 day in the penitentiary.

¹⁰⁸ "Strong Resolutions Adopted At Mass Meeting," *Hickman Courier*, Sept. 16, 1915.

some other crime.¹⁰⁹ Such white criminals were viewed in the same way as blacks, and might be lynched accordingly. Otherwise, by and large, it was a widely accepted practice for white men to kill each other as a matter of honor, and to kill perceived criminals -- both white and black -- as a matter of justice.

They might rescue each other for the same reasons. A story found on the front page of the *Hickman Courier* illustrates this point. The article, apparently written by a *Hickman Courier* editor, began: "People who take law into their own hands generally deal out humanity -- not law -- and often materially aid the ends of justice." To prove his point, the editor told the story of a white farmer in North Carolina, who had been plagued by thieves, and had shot and killed another white man who came on his place. As it happened, the dead man was not a thief but "an honest stranger." The farmer was

¹⁰⁹ After 1890, when the law was changed and a conviction for murder no longer carried a mandatory sentence of death or life imprisonment, whites in Fulton County became more likely to receive prison sentences for homicide convictions. For example, Robt. F. Ferguson, two years, "Ferguson Murder Trial," *Hickman Courier*, Sept. 24, 1908; J. W. Patterson, eight years, "From the Fulton County Capitol," *Hickman Courier*, May 4, 1911; Lee Carter (former Fulton Chief of Police), life sentence, "Sentenced For Life," *Hickman Courier*, Oct. 19, 1911.

A similar change in homicide conviction rates occurred in Obion County: Smith and Pete Brannon, white, 15 years and 5 years respectively for 2d degree murder, "For Murder at Lake," *Hickman Courier*, May 25, 1911; Al Ferguson, white (charged with his second murder, the first victim having been a black man, leading to an acquittal), 10-20 years for 2d degree murder, "Will Roberson Killed, Fulton City Marshal," *Hickman Courier*, Sept. 28, 1916. In one case, two white men (father and son) were sentenced to death following conviction for a murder that arose from a craps game. The governor commuted their sentences on the eve of their respective execution dates. "Court Sits In The Open Air," *Nashville Banner* (Nashville, TN), Aug. 18, 1910; "Alexander Thankful," *Tennessean*, July 17, 1912; "Father Tells Son Life Is Spared By Governor Of State," *Tennessean*, Aug. 13, 1912.

nonetheless convicted of first degree murder and sentenced to hang. His neighbors sought executive clemency for him and when it was denied, “forcibly released him from jail and sent him secretly out of the State.” Effectively acknowledging this incident as part of the code of white male conduct, the *Courier’s* editor applauded white men coming to the aid of each other.¹¹⁰

¹¹⁰ Uncaptioned news item, *Hickman Courier*, Mar. 4, 1881.

CHAPTER IV AN ANALYSIS OF LYNCHINGS IN THE TRI-COUNTIES

COMMON CHARACTERISTICS IN LYNCH-PRONE AREAS OF THE SOUTH

In 1996, Tolnay and Beck identified a group of characteristics typically associated with areas where lynchings were prone to occur. As a result of their research, they concluded that lynchings occurred most frequently in counties exhibiting the following: large African American populations; the predominance of cotton production; and a sharp class division among whites, as reflected by the number of farm owners versus tenant farmers.¹¹¹ They also found that southern lynchings “tended to mass together during particular periods and within certain locations.”¹¹² Lynching numbers peaked in the early 1890s, then began a general downward trend with a spike in 1908 and another one in the immediate aftermath of World War I, though neither spike equalled the numbers of the early 1890s.¹¹³

When examined at the state level, the states with the largest absolute black populations had more lynchings than states with smaller absolute black populations. This statistic, however, broke down when victims were calculated on a per capita basis. Kentucky and Tennessee’s lynching rates increased dramatically and are more akin to that of Alabama and Georgia when looked at on a per capita basis.¹¹⁴ At the county level, the most populous counties, with large metropolitan areas and large black populations, were

¹¹¹ Tolnay and Beck, *A Festival of Violence*, 41-43.

¹¹² Tolnay and Beck, *A Festival of Violence*, 50.

¹¹³ Tolnay and Beck, *A Festival of Violence*, 29-31.

¹¹⁴ Tolnay and Beck, *A Festival of Violence*, 38, Table 2-3.

often responsible for the largest number of lynchings. This was true in Tennessee (Shelby County/Memphis), Mississippi (Hinds County/Jackson), Alabama (Jefferson County/Birmingham), and Georgia (Fulton County/Atlanta).¹¹⁵ But, again, some counties with relatively small black populations stood out for the large number of lynchings carried out there. In light of the difference, Tolnay and Beck concluded that the county level is a more accurate unit of analysis than the state for understanding the social, economic and political conditions that led men to resort to lynching. Tolnay and Beck argued that, at the county level, patterns would emerge to demonstrate that whites carried out lynchings when they felt threatened by the African American population.¹¹⁶

Tolnay's later work with Amy Kate Bailey, *Lynched: The Victims of Southern Mob Violence*, relied on the same common community characteristics as those identified in Tolnay and Beck's 1996 study, but Bailey and Tolnay shifted their focus to explore whether there were common characteristics among the victims.¹¹⁷ Bailey and Tolnay discovered that, in general, lynch victims were more likely to be lower-status black men with lower-status occupations and weak ties to the community.¹¹⁸ At the same time, a higher social standing in the community actually increased the risk of lynching especially in communities with few higher status blacks. In other words, those African Americans

¹¹⁵ Equal Justice Initiative, "Lynching in America: Confronting the Legacy of Racial Terror," 3d ed., <https://lynchinginamerica.eji.org/report/>, accessed Nov. 22, 2020. EJI's statistics cover the period 1877 through 1950.

¹¹⁶ Tolnay and Beck, *A Festival of Violence*, 38-39.

¹¹⁷ Amy Kate Bailey and Stewart E. Tolnay, *Lynched: The Victims of Southern Mob Violence* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2015).

¹¹⁸ Bailey and Tolnay, *Lynched*, 135-136.

who were safest were those who did not stand out on either end of the social spectrum. There was also an increased risk of lynching in those counties where the Democratic Party predominated, which, of course, encompassed most of the South.¹¹⁹ The characteristics identified by Bailey and Tolnay, in much the same way as the characteristics identified by Tolnay and Beck, suggested that it was necessary to look at the county level rather than the state level in order to determine the cause for lynchings.

Rather than focus on community or victim demographics, historian Fitzhugh Brundage examined the character of the mob itself for insight into why lynchings occurred and how they were perceived in a given community. In looking specifically at lynchings in the states of Georgia and Virginia, Brundage broke mobs into four types: posses, private, terrorist, and mass mobs.¹²⁰ Posses were formed by law enforcement to assist in the hunt of wanted men and, in the heat of the moment, sometimes carried out their own summary justice upon capture of an alleged criminal. Terrorist mobs acted randomly to intimidate blacks who in some way threatened the status quo. Their intent was seldom to kill blacks, although blacks who resisted were likely to be lynched. Private mobs formed for the singular purpose of lynching a specific victim in order to exact vengeance for an alleged crime. “Bound together by a shared sense of personal injury” and acting with a sense of urgency, private mobs often took their victims directly from law enforcement authorities who were either transporting the victims or holding the victims in jail. Such mobs tended to operate at night and either under disguise or via

¹¹⁹ Bailey and Tolnay, *Lynched*, 209-212.

¹²⁰ Brundage, *Lynching in the New South*, 19.

subterfuge in order to wrest victims from the authorities. The surreptitious behavior of these private mobs suggests they did not expect community approval for their actions. Mass mobs, by contrast, were those comprised of more than fifty individuals, and could often number into the hundreds. Mass mobs typically arose to address an alleged crime which a community viewed as particularly heinous, and the resulting lynchings often involved community participation. In general terms, mass mob lynchings indicated broad community support, while private mob actions typically brought a “brief spasm of condemnation,” followed by an unspoken acceptance that the lynching was a more or less appropriate punishment for the victim’s alleged crime.¹²¹ “Spectacle lynchings” fell under the heading of mass mobs, although that term has typically been reserved for those lynchings which were planned in advance and involved a ritualized execution of the victim.¹²²

More recently, the Equal Justice Initiative has produced a report which breaks down lynchings according to type. Four types are based on the stated reason for the lynching: fear of interracial sex; minor social transgressions; allegations of crime; and resistance to mistreatment. Two additional types are public spectacle lynchings and lynchings which targeted an entire African American community. The EJI report distinguishes “racial terror lynchings” from the lynchings of whites, which were always based on an alleged crime and contained no element of terrorism. Features of terror included extreme brutality, such as burning, torture, and mutilation; those lynchings

¹²¹ Brundage, *Lynching in the New South*, 32.

¹²² Equal Justice Initiative, “Lynching in America: Confronting the Legacy of Racial Terror,” 3d ed., <https://lynchinginamerica.eji.org/report/>, accessed Nov. 22, 2020.

without any semblance of criminal justice process, or for simple breaches of racial decorum; and public spectacles, which invited white community participation.¹²³

CHARACTERISTICS OF TRI-COUNTY LYNCHINGS

Few, if any, of the characteristics identified by Tolnay and Beck or Bailey and Tolnay fit the pattern of lynchings in Obion, Lake, and Fulton Counties. The characteristics which do match are the most universal. Specifically, the Tri-Counties were heavily Democratic counties, but the same could be said for most of the South. It is also true that many of the men who were lynched were farm hands or itinerants without strong ties to the surrounding community, but almost as many did have community ties and were gainfully employed. Otherwise, the lynchings in the Tri-Counties do not seem to share any patterns or characteristics in common with the characteristics identified by Tolnay and Beck or Bailey and Tolnay. Most, however, fit within the private mob characteristics identified by Brundage, and within EJI's category of lynchings based on allegations of crime. According to newspaper descriptions, only two lynchings involved acts of extreme brutality, and only one highly unusual case had any other hallmarks of terrorism.

Spatial Distribution of Lynchings

The lynching incidents within the Tri-Counties were not clustered in particular years but were spread fairly evenly throughout the period from 1869 through 1918, with only one lynching occurring after 1918 in 1931. Looking at lynchings by incident -- when two or more conspirators may have been lynched for the same reason -- the only

¹²³Equal Justice Initiative, "Lynching in America," 4, 5, 27.

cluster of lynchings occurred in 1887-1888, when there were four incidents in 1887 and three in 1888. From a socio-economic viewpoint, there appears to have been nothing exceptional about the years 1887 and 1888. Between 1880 and 1890, the total number of farms grew in both Obion and Fulton Counties while the number of tenancies declined, which suggests that white farmers prospered during the period. Although that decade seems to have been more difficult for white farmers in Lake County, only two lynchings, seven years apart, reportedly occurred in Lake County during that decade -- one in 1881 and another in 1888.¹²⁴ Changing status among white farmers therefore does not appear to have motivated lynchings during the peak period in any of the three counties.

Furthermore, the percentage of African-Americans living in the Tri-Counties did not change appreciably during the period from 1880 until 1900. Lake County actually saw a slight decline in the African American population (from 17.5% to 16%), while Fulton County saw a modest increase from 20 to 25% over the same 20-year period. In Obion County, the percentage actually remained the same -- 17 % from 1880 through 1900. In other words, there was no influx of African Americans that would have raised alarms in the area. Indeed, the 1900 percentages held true for both Fulton and Obion Counties, with only slight variations, throughout the Jim Crow era. Only Lake County continued to see an increase in its African American population, but even it eventually leveled off in 1940 at slightly less than one-third of the overall population of the county.

It is notable however that most of the lynchings in the peak period occurred in Obion County. Fulton County had only one lynching in 1887, and, as previously noted,

¹²⁴ See Appendix.

Lake County had only one lynching in 1888. Obion County, on the other hand, saw five lynching incidents with a resulting eight black men dead. Despite the cluster, the circumstances surrounding each incident were very different. First, the lynchings were for a variety of supposed reasons and were spread across a 20-month period occurring in March 1887 (murder), April 1887 (sexual assault of a child), December 1887 (sexual assault of a child), March 1888 (barn burning), and October 1888 (shooting a white man).¹²⁵ Second, two of the lynchings may have been carried out by private mobs from Fulton County rather than Obion County. Third, while most of the Tri-County lynchings throughout the post-Reconstruction era were carried out by private white mobs, the April 1887 lynching was carried out by a mass mob in the Obion County courtroom during the victim's preliminary hearing; and the December 1887 lynchings were carried out by an unofficial posse reportedly composed of both black and white men. The December 1887 incident involved three black men who were hunted down and lynched for allegedly assaulting a ten-year old white girl. According to newspaper accounts, "negroes in the community" condemned the men and joined whites in hunting them down.¹²⁶ After October 1888, there were no more lynchings in Obion County until November 1891. Indeed, between 1890 and 1894, when the rest of the South saw the peak years for

¹²⁵ See Appendix.

¹²⁶ "A Triple Lynching. . . . Three Negro Brutes Speedily Hung by a Crowd of Whites and Blacks," *Weekly Public Ledger* (Memphis, TN), Dec. 13, 1887.

lynchings, Obion County had only one in 1891 and one in 1892. Lake and Fulton Counties had none.¹²⁷

There were no other consecutive year clusters, and the only other years in which there were as many as three incidents were in 1895 and 1908. The lynchings in both years were unusual for several reasons. As will be discussed in the following section, the lynchings of 1895 were unique in that two of them were not typical vengeance killings. One, which occurred in Hickman on September 2, 1895, was the only instance in which someone was taken from jail and lynched simply for drunken antisocial behavior (see Butcher lynching at p. 77). The other, which may not even have been a lynching but rather an ambush by some disgruntled individuals, occurred on a road leading into Union City on September 10, 1895 (see Ward lynching at pp. 71-72). Despite the proximity of dates, there are no obvious connections between the two incidents, but it is notable that both lynchings involved black men whose interactions with white men had become difficult. The year 1908 was extraordinary in that two of the incidents involved the terrorist group known as the Reelfoot Lake Night Riders. Those incidents will be discussed at length in a separate section. 1908 is also the only year in which there was at

¹²⁷ I have been reluctant to place too much emphasis on the particular county in which an incident occurred because, as my argument suggests, the counties were very cohesive and their borders rarely observed by their inhabitants. Lynch mobs often crossed county lines and even state lines in pursuit of their victims. Law enforcement officers took evasive actions to protect their prisoners which similarly involved moving the prisoners from one county to another and, when taking the trains in particular, might mean moving the prisoners across the state line between stations. In some cases I have had to use my best judgment in making a decision about which county should be credited with a particular lynching.

least one incident in each county.¹²⁸ Again, that fact is largely attributable to the Night Riders, whose violence transcended county lines. Coincidentally, one of the 1908 lynchings involved the only other incident in which a black man, David Walker, was lynched for being difficult.

Stated Reasons for Lynchings

With only a very few exceptions, the lynchings in all three counties throughout the post-Reconstruction and early Jim Crow eras were vengeance killings for alleged criminal actions -- primarily for alleged murders, sexual assaults, and attacks on uniformed officers.¹²⁹ Only five out of the total 41 incidents in the Tri-Counties involved victims not charged initially with some form of criminal behavior. Those six incidents were largely outside the norm for lynchings in the area. Indeed, the first reported lynching in the Tri-Counties was not grounded in alleged criminal behavior at all, and interestingly, is one of only three lynchings which resulted in criminal charges being filed against members of the lynch mob. It also uniquely illustrates the virulent animosity of former Confederates toward freed slaves.

In 1869, a white masked mob attacked African American farm laborers working on a plantation in Madrid Bend (then Obion County) under the supervision and protection of their former owner, Willis Jones. The mob wanted to dispossess the laborers of their legally owned firearms. Robert Dickinson, a member of the mob from Fulton County, was shot during the ensuing gun battle in which Jones and his friend Albert Nall, along

¹²⁸ See Appendix.

¹²⁹ See Appendix.

with the laborers, defended themselves against the mob. Dickinson's cousin, Benjamin Beecham, was also shot and wounded. Dickinson later died. Although the mob fled and the laborers surrendered to local authorities, the remaining members of the mob returned the following day, snatched the laborers from the authorities, and "riddled" five of them with bullets. Afterwards, Mr. Jones's neighbors became concerned for his own well-being. Mr. Jones, who was a merchant as well as a planter, said he "had done nothing but his duty in the whole business, and was willing to submit to the law; was prepared to have his acts investigated before a proper tribunal, and he did not think it proper in a man of his standing to fly from his home like a malefactor."

The Dickinson family was not satisfied. According to a widely-circulated account, at some point (it is unclear when):

the mother of Dickinson came along, a very fine type of matronly beauty and dignity. . . . She bewailed the loss of her boy in the most affecting manner; in glowing yet terrible language called to mind the fact of her husband and her father and five of her children being murdered by negroes some years ago, and now the last of her offspring, and the flower of the family, lay cold and still at her feet, butchered by the same diabolical fiends.

There was no reason to believe that the dead black men had been involved in any way with the deaths of the other Dickinson family members. In the eyes of the Dickinsons, however, all black men were "diabolical fiends," even though Jones's workers only offense had been the legal possession of firearms. The people who gathered to hear this woman's speech seem to have sympathized with her eloquent tale of suffering because

the crowd became so inflamed that Mr. Jones was finally persuaded to travel to Memphis, under escort of a deputy sheriff, for his own safety.

Jones eventually returned to the Bend and never faced charges in connection with the death of Dickinson, but he did press for criminal charges to be brought against Benjamin Beecham and another member of the mob. The prosecuting attorney agreed to take the matter before the grand jury, and they indicted both Beecham and one of his accomplices for assault with intent to commit first degree murder against Jones, Nall, and seven of Jones's former slaves. The accomplice was never found, but Beecham was arrested and required to post bond. Additionally, according to David Hayes, Tennessee's governor offered a reward of \$500 for the arrest of anyone responsible for the murder of three of the African American victims, but no additional arrests were ever made.¹³⁰ Ultimately, the charges against Beecham were dismissed based on a jurisdictional defect related to the physical location of the circuit court in that part of Obion County.

In spite of the State's attempts to hold the mob responsible, the white community adopted Mrs. Dickinson's position. Within weeks of the incident, "prominent and influential citizens of Madrid Bend," convened a meeting at which it was decided that

¹³⁰ "Lynch Law," *Public Ledger* (Memphis, TN), Nov. 24, 1869; "Wholesale Butchery, A Body of Maskers Attack a House and are Repulsed with Great Loss, Two of them Killed and Two Others Badly Wounded, Five Negroes Subsequently Slaughtered by a Mob," *Republican Banner* (Nashville, TN), Nov. 27, 1869; "A Much Needed Law, More about the Madrid Bend Tragedy," *Memphis Daily Appeal*, Feb. 6, 1870. Three of the victims were identified as Henry Lewis, John Isaacs (or Jones), and Alfred Robinson. No record has been located of the names of the other two who died. In total, however, seven employees were shot, and, in addition to Lewis, Isaacs, and Robinson, their names are listed in *The Historic Reelfoot Lake Region* as Richard Jones, Peter Harper, Sam Cunningham, and James Harper. Hayes, *Historic Reelfoot Lake Region*, 260-266.

“all negroes” in possession of “arms of any kind” must either sell their weapons or relinquish them. Without any legal authority whatsoever, these influential citizens selected a chairman and directed him to appoint a committee of fifteen citizens to oversee the district and ensure compliance with their “resolution.” The resolution stated that the community was “opposed to night patrolling, particularly in disguise,” but it was also “opposed to white men leading or encouraging negroes in using arms against either white or black.” In their minds, fault lay entirely with the African Americans who had had the temerity to defend themselves:

We have beheld with fearful foreboding, for some time, a disposition on the part of some of the negroes of our county to procure and use arms against the citizens hereof; and recent events point with unerring certainty to the fact that no one can feel entirely safe and free from danger whilst the present state of affairs exists among us.¹³¹

After the Madrid Bend lynchings, the lynchings of the 1870s and 1880s followed a pattern. All of them until 1895 involved an alleged crime. Then, for a period of time, the area experienced a wave of lynchings which seem to have been the work of moral regulators, “whitecaps,” and Night Riders. In 1895, a black man named Lum Ward, got into a dispute with a white man named Gentry Palmer, whom Ward accused of having killed his dog. Ward and Palmer, along with Palmer’s brother and some friends, got into a “shooting scrape” on August 7, 1895, which resulted in Ward being shot five times, though not fatally. One month later, on September 10, 1895, while Ward was on his way to court to testify against the men for shooting him, he apparently was ambushed. This

¹³¹ “Law and Order, The Citizens of Madrid Bend and Obion In Council -- Resolutions, etc.,” *Memphis Daily Appeal*, Dec. 7, 1869.

time the shots were fatal, and he was found “filled with buckshot” in the road outside Union City. This incident may or may not have involved a mob although it is often listed as one of the lynchings in Obion County.¹³²

In the same year, Will Butcher, a “well-known negro boy” in Hickman, described in one news item as being “a worthless, quarrelsome negro,” was taken from the jail after being locked up for public drunkenness and carried to the banks of the Mississippi River by a small mob of masked men who “riddled” his body with bullets. This incident seemed to come as such a shock to the community that, for once, the *Hickman Courier* expressed concern and suggested to its readers that the matter would “doubtless” be turned over to the local grand jury for investigation. In fact, it was, although the grand jury apparently never returned any indictments.¹³³

The other two incidents were clearly the work of Night Riders and include the lynchings of the David Walker family in early October 1908 and a white man, Quentin Rankin, later in October of the same year. These Night Rider lynchings, and possibly the 1895 incident on the banks of the Mississippi River, are arguably the only examples of terrorist mob lynching in the Tri-Counties throughout the post-Reconstruction and Jim Crow eras. As previously stated, the Night Rider incidents will be discussed at length in a later section of this paper.

¹³² “A Negro Accuses a White Man of Killing His Dog,” *Tennessean*, Aug. 9, 1895; “Dead In The Road, The Corpse of Lum Wood Riddled With Bullets,” *St. Louis Post-Dispatch* (St. Louis, MO), Sept. 10, 1895; “Filled With Buckshot, Dead Body of a Worthless Negro Found Near Union City,” *Tennessean*, Sept. 11, 1895.

¹³³ “Riddled,” *Courier-Journal*, Sept. 3, 1895; “Will Butcher Killed,” *Hickman Courier*, Sept. 6, 1895.

Apart from the exceptions discussed above, it is notable that lynchings seem to have been reserved for the crimes most commonly associated with legal executions at the time, *i.e.*, attacks on police officers, murder, and sexual assault. Of the 41 lynching incidents across the three counties, 15 incidents involved alleged sexual assaults and 16 involved murder or attempted murder (two of which were rape/murders). Seven of the incidents involved alleged attacks specifically on law enforcement officers. In only three instances was the primary allegation the commission of a property crime (one theft and two arsons), and the last one occurred in 1888.¹³⁴

Interestingly, the only lynching strictly for theft occurred in 1877 and involved a white victim, Jarvis Anderson, who reportedly was an ex-convict and head of a gang of thieves operating in Fulton County.¹³⁵ In the two arson cases, the alleged arsonists were also suspected of other crimes. Samuel Fowler, lynched in Obion County on December 8, 1885, was supposedly an ex-convict who allegedly set fire to a store to cover his theft of goods from the store.¹³⁶ Eli Davie, wanted for burning down a barn filled with 1,000 pounds of tobacco and machinery, was “arrested while hiding in a straw stack by four other negroes.” At his preliminary hearing, Davie was said to have confessed not only to setting fire to the barn but burning down several other houses as well. A guard was escorting Davie by train to the county jail at Hickman when a mob of fifty men, waiting

¹³⁴ See Appendix.

¹³⁵ “Kentucky Lynch Law,” *Cincinnati (OH) Enquirer*, July 2, 1877; “Prisoners Rescued by a Mob,” *New York (NY) Daily Herald*, July 1, 1877.

¹³⁶ “An Incendiary Thief Lynched,” *New York Times*, Dec. 11, 1885; “Lynching At Kenton, A Burglariou Firebug Found Dangling From a Tree,” *Knoxville (TN) Daily Chronicle*, Dec. 11, 1885.

at Woodland Mills on the Tennessee line, demanded the guard release Davie to them. They then took Davie “to a tree about 300 yards from the depot and hung him.” His body was found riddled with bullets. In the words of the *Tennessean*, “The hanging occurred in Obion County but the Kentucky boys did the job.”¹³⁷

Most significantly, of the six white men who were lynched, two were lynched for being in robbery and theft gangs, two were lynched for murdering peace officers, and one was lynched in a political crime. None were ever lynched for a non-fatal attack on a peace officer, or for killing a white man not in a uniform. And none were lynched for any crime involving a white woman. Indeed, in all my research, I did not find a single allegation prior to 1900 in which a white man had raped a white woman or even given a white woman reason to fear a possible sexual assault.

Attacks on Law Enforcement Officers

For members of communities who seemed so eager to take the law into their own hands, it is particularly interesting to discover how protective mob participants were of law enforcement. Perhaps mob participants considered themselves to be law enforcers and so believed they were protecting one of their own. For whatever reason, white men did not tolerate whites who murdered officers any more than they tolerated blacks who murdered officers. Of the five white men who were lynched in Obion County between 1871 and 1908, three were lynched for the murder of marshalls. In 1871, David Toler

¹³⁷ “A Barn-Burner Lynched, Kentuckians Come Down Into Obion County and Hang a Negro Barn-Burner,” *Tennessean*, Mar. 16, 1888; “Kentucky Boys Did It, That is What is Said Concerning the Lynching of a Colored Man in Tennessee,” *Concordia (KS) Blade-Empire*, Mar. 17, 1888; “Left On a Limb,” *Owensboro (KY) Messenger*, Mar. 17, 1888; “Another Mob,” *Hickman Courier*, Mar. 16, 1888.

and Levi Farrington, both white, both suspected of being part of a gang of railway robbers, were killed by a mob while in jail in Union City. Reports conflicted, but it seems most likely that Toler had shot and killed a member of Union City law enforcement, and, following arrest, was placed in a cell with Farrington, the alleged gang leader. A mob forced its way into the jail, shot and killed Farrington in his cell, then forcibly removed Toler from the cell and hanged him a short distance from the jail.¹³⁸

The other incident, which occurred in 1902, is unusual in that the victim was a young white farmer from Dukedom, in neighboring Weakley County, Tennessee. Thomas Blackard was accused of having killed a deputy marshall during a trivial encounter on the street in South Fulton. Blackard, apparently heavily intoxicated at the time, was captured following a chase through town during which a local saloonkeeper was also shot and injured. While the coroner's jury was meeting to determine the officer's cause of death, word came that a mob had broken Blackard out of his cell. He was found swinging from a bridge near town. "The lynchers had disappeared." In the words of the *Los Angeles Times*, "Half an hour later the Coroner's jury brought in the non-committal verdict,

¹³⁸ "Murder and Hanging at Union City," *Hickman Courier*, Dec. 23, 1871; "Bloody Work at Union City," *Whig and Tribune* (Jackson, TN), Dec. 23, 1871.

‘Both dead.’”¹³⁹ None of the articles in the press displayed any sympathy for Blackard or concern that he had met his death at the hands of a mob within hours of his arrest.¹⁴⁰

The lynchings of whites who had killed uniformed officers bore many of the same characteristics as the incidents involving the lynching of black men; however, black men were lynched not only for killing uniformed officers but simply for attacking them as well. In addition, the ferocity of the lynchings of black men for attacking uniformed officers was dramatically greater. In a South Fulton incident in Obion County, three African American men jumped a city marshal, who had recently arrested one of the men for carrying a concealed weapon. According to the *Courier-Journal*, Will and Bud Paschall “held Walker’s arms while [Bill] Jones proceeded to cut and stab him in the throat, arms and side.” Walker survived the attack. Will Paschall was not as fortunate. Although all three men escaped town, Will Paschall was captured in Carlisle County, Kentucky, and extradited to Obion County. On May 11, 1896, as Paschall was being taken across the Tennessee line, “an angry mob made up of both Kentuckians and Tennesseans had formed and started in pursuit.” When the mob overtook the sheriff’s

¹³⁹ “Double Kentucky Tragedy,” *Champaign (IL) Daily Gazette*, April 10, 1902; “Swift Retribution Follows Murder,” *Los Angeles (CA) Times*, April 11, 1902.

¹⁴⁰ In a similar incident in nearby Mayfield, KY, a white man, named Tom Tinker, wanted for robbery, refused to surrender and engaged in a gun battle with sheriff’s deputies, one of whom was shot in the crossfire and later died. Tinker was captured and taken to jail, but within hours a mob of 50 unmasked men “armed to the teeth” pulled him out of jail, strung him up to a tree in the courthouse lawn and “hacked the body to pieces.” See “Tinker Kills Deputy,” *Hickman Courier*, Feb. 11, 1915. In a bizarre twist, although none of the mob members were identified, a photographer who took photos of the body and sold them was prosecuted and required to write a public note of apology. The *Courier-Journal* noted that no apology seemed to have been required of the mob. “How About It?” *Courier-Journal*, Feb. 23, 1915.

party “at a dark spot in the Tennessee woods,” they seized Paschall and tied a rope around his neck. He “was strung up to a tree by a hundred willing hands.” The jury at the inquest found that he strangled to death by a rope “in the hands of parties unknown.” Jones and Bud Paschall were captured at Island No. 4 in Fulton County the following day. The reports about what happened to Bud Paschall are unclear (rumors circulated that a posse had found him and lynched him before he ever made it to a jail); however, Jones was taken back to Union City for trial. “At an early hour” on the morning of September 17, 1896, “about thirty masked men” went to the jail and demanded that the jailer turn Jones over to them. Jones was under guard by ten deputies. According to the *Nashville Tennessean*, “after about thirty minutes of hilarious confab,” the sheriff told them that unless they went home he was was going to arrest them. The mob complied, and left the jail. Although the story about the lynch mob was widely reported in the press, there is no follow-up report regarding the outcome of the trial or what became of Bill Jones.¹⁴¹

A more sensational murder of a peace officer and even more vicious lynching of three African American men occurred in Lake County in November 1908. Despite the fact that Reelfoot Lake Night Riders were being rounded up and jailed that same month for their numerous acts of mob violence throughout the area, a mob in Lake County did not hesitate to seize three alleged murderers from the county jail and return them to the murder scene to execute them. The three men were Marshall, Jim, and Ed Stineback, brothers from a neighboring county who had disrupted a Saturday evening worship

¹⁴¹ “Fulton Excited,” *Courier-Journal*, May 12, 1896; “To Meet Their Fate,” *Tennessean*, May 13, 1896; “Attempted Lynching,” *Nashville Banner*, Sept. 17, 1896; “Hot After Bill Jones,” *Tennessean*, Sept. 18, 1896.

service at a black Baptist church not far from Tiptonville. When, at the request of church members, two sheriff's deputies arrived to arrest the Stinebacks for disturbing the peace, the brothers shot and killed one deputy and wounded the other, then ran. After an extensive manhunt, they were finally tracked down and safely transported to the county jail. A mob soon surrounded the jail, and the sheriff sent word to the governor that he needed help. The governor, already dealing with bad national publicity from the Night Riders' murder of Quentin Rankin, urged the citizens of Tiptonville to "prevent lynching by all means; it will bring additional disgrace and notoriety on our State," and ordered members of the militia stationed at Union City, where they were guarding Night Rider prisoners, to go to Tiptonville to back up the sheriff.

Fearing that the mob would rush the jail, the sheriff and some local lawyers hit upon the idea of staging a quick "trial" at which a hastily summoned jury could find the men guilty. A swift execution would follow. Plans were made accordingly, but the mob saw no need to wait for even a sham formality. While the sheriff was at home for dinner, and before the militia could arrive, the mob rushed the jail, told the guards they would kill every one of them if they got in the way, grabbed the Stinebacks, and took them back to the church where the shooting had occurred. When the sheriff arrived at the church, he found the Stineback brothers' bodies hanging from a scaffold in the center of the church. Regional newspapers condemned the lynchings and the notion of a sham trial, while members of the local white community expressed outrage at the lynchings and vowed to

track down the leaders of the mob. There is no evidence to suggest a formal investigation was ever undertaken.¹⁴²

There were three other lynchings of black men accused of attacking uniformed officers in Fulton County. One involved a man named Bill Dooley, whose lynching is discussed in a separate section of this paper (see pp. 119-120). The others merit special attention for several unique reasons: 1) they constitute the last two lynchings ever reported in Fulton County; and 2) as with the case involving Mr. Dooley, both prompted grand jury investigations.

In the first case, Lawrence Dempsey was accused of murdering an Illinois Central watchman named Clarence Dublin on May 9, 1917. According to the *Hickman Courier*, a man claiming to be Dempsey's brother-in-law notified authorities that "Dempsey attacked Dublin" after Dublin found Dempsey in a box car. Dempsey allegedly attacked Dublin with a razor leaving him with multiple wounds including a gash five inches long in his neck. Dempsey ran, but was later caught at Greenfield, Tennessee, and returned to Fulton on May 18. Authorities later took Dempsey to a Paducah hospital, where Dublin identified Dempsey as his assailant (Dublin had previously been presented with a different suspect whom he stated was not his attacker), then returned Dempsey to the Fulton city jail. According to the *Hickman Courier*, on May 20, 1917, "[n]ight officer Walter Shupe discovered at 3:15 a.m., that the jail had been broken open and the negro

¹⁴² "Three Blacks Lynched," *Hickman Courier*, Dec. 3, 1908; "Three Men Hanged In Front Of Pulpit," *Nashville Banner*, Nov. 25, 1908; "Who Got The Six Hundred? Reported That the Negroes Lynched Had that Much," *Nashville (TN) Globe*, Nov. 27, 1908; Margaret Vandiver also provides a lengthy description of the lynching in *Lethal Punishment*, 114-117.

gone. Entrance was gained by taking a four inch iron pipe about eight feet long and battering the lock off.” Dempsey was found hanging from a telephone cable “about three feet from the jail. . . . No one has been found who saw them do their work.” Dublin died from blood poisoning two days later.

The *Hickman Courier* argued that Dempsey deserved to be hanged and even made a caustic and vaguely threatening comment about the rope used to hang Dempsey (“The knot and noose indicates someone around Fulton certainly knows how to make a hangman’s knot”). The Circuit Court judge, on the other hand, did not take the lynching lightly. The same newspaper report stated, “Judge [Bunk] Gardner has said that he will have a grand jury investigate the matter, that he will g[et] to the bottom of it; and that if he could not get any one in Fulton county [to serve on the grand jury] he would send to another county.”¹⁴³ The judge was also quoted as saying that “no such outrage could be committed without the guilty parties being prosecuted.” Following the lead of Judge Gardner, the governor of Kentucky, Augustus O. Stanley, issued rewards for the convictions of mob participants, and, on July 9, 1917, a grand jury was empaneled in Fulton to investigate the lynching. As the *Paducah Sun-Democrat* stated in its article on July 10, 1917, however, “the entire affair [is] shrouded in mystery. . . What action the grand jury will take is problematical.”¹⁴⁴ Indeed, despite the efforts of Judge Gardner and Governor Stanley, no grand jury findings were ever reported.

¹⁴³ “Mob Visits Fulton Jail, Negro Hanged,” *Hickman Courier*, May 24, 1917.

¹⁴⁴ “Will Call Grand Jury To Probe Fulton Lynching,” May 24, 1917; *Owensboro (KY) Messenger*, “Fulton Lynching To Be Investigated,” *Owensboro Messenger*, May 29, 1917; “Fulton Grand Jury To Probe Lynching Of Negro At Jail,” *Paducah Sun-Democrat*, July 10, 1917.

The last lynching to occur in Fulton County also involved an attack on a law enforcement officer. On December 13, 1918, a mob lynched a recently discharged World War I veteran for allegedly having beaten up a deputy sheriff when the deputy tried to arrest him and three “comrades” for robbing two other black men. According to newspaper reports, Charlie Lewis was “said to have refused to submit to arrest, asserting that his army uniform made him immune from arrest by a civil officer.” Following the encounter with the deputy sheriff, Lewis and his friends escaped, but, after a chase back and forth across the Tennessee-Kentucky line, authorities finally captured Lewis in Tennessee and put him on the train to Hickman under guard. Mobs tried to pull him off the train at two different stops on the line, but law enforcement officers held them at bay until they got Lewis into the jail. At the jail, a mob demanded the keys. The jailor, however, refused to turn the keys over and took them with him as he fled. According to the *Maysville Public Ledger*, the jailor’s wife “followed the mob to the cell, begging them to leave.” Meanwhile, the sheriff and two deputies “were backed into a kitchen and locked up,” whereupon “an infuriated mob, with sledge hammers, forced the heavy iron doors of the jail . . . cells,” took Charlie Lewis, and hanged him from a tree 200 yards from the jail.

Once again Judge Bunk Gardner convened a grand jury and “urged the jurors to use every effort to apprehend and indict those responsible for the lynching of Charlie

Lewis.”¹⁴⁵ As in the Dempsey case, despite intervention by the governor and the local judge’s referral to the grand jury, no arrests were ever made.

Other Murders, Attempted Murders, and Arsonists

As in other parts of the United States, theft and robbery gangs seem to have been a major problem in the latter part of the nineteenth century, and when a robbery ended in murder, a lynching typically followed. One such incident in Obion County led to the lynching of five men on two different dates in 1885. Almus Young, Charles Latham, and Frank Freeman, all African American, were lynched by a mob of “one hundred armed men” at the Union City Fairgrounds on March 10, 1885. Bud Farris, white, and Freeman Ward, African American, were caught and lynched at the same location a month later on April 14, 1885. During one of the gang’s alleged robberies at a farm outside Union City in December 1884, a white homeowner, Thomas H. Montgomery, was shot and killed when he interrupted the gang while they were supposedly making their third attempt to break into his home. The incident led local officials to hire a Nashville detective and “a colored operative” to track down the gang. Based on leads developed by the operative, five robbers were caught while breaking into a freight car in March 1885, and turned over to the county marshall. Shortly after the arrest, “a mob of over one hundred men forcibly took them from the Marshall and took all five to a tree at the Fair Grounds.” The mob

¹⁴⁵ “Mob Batters Down Jail Doors And Hangs Negro,” *Courier-Journal*, Dec. 17, 1918; “Jail Doors Are Smashed By A Mob At Hickman,” *Public Ledger* (Maysville, KY), Dec. 18, 1918; “Wants Lynchers Caught,” *Paducah Sun-Democrat*, Jan. 29, 1919. Two of Lewis’s comrades were later apprehended and taken by Jailor Murchison to the Graves County Jail for safe-keeping. There are no further news reports regarding the disposition of their cases. See “Negroes Taken To Jail At Mayfield For Safety,” *Paducah Sun-Democrat*, Dec. 19, 1918.

seemed to exercise some judgment by lynching only men associated with the Montgomery murder inasmuch as two of the robbers were returned to the custody of the marshall. Farris and Ward, presumed to be members of the gang that robbed Montgomery, were arrested a month later. “[B]oth were taken from the guardhouse by a crowd of determined citizens of Obion County and lynched.” The national press had a field day with the “Bandit Band,” as the *Courier-Journal* referred to the robbers, and covered Mr. Montgomery’s murder in detail as well as the death of Mrs. Montgomery, who contracted a severe cold on the night of the murder and died within weeks.¹⁴⁶

Unlike the coverage given to the Bandit Band, the local press often made short shrift of lynchings. Where no details were known, editors felt free to speculate.

On March 25, 1887, for example, the *Hickman Courier* reported the lynching of Bill Hardy, without caption, as follows:

Bill Hardy, the colored man who killed a white boy at Scott & Summer’s saw mill last spring, and at the time arrested in Hickman for the crime, was taken from the Troy jail Monday night of last week and hung. Why the mob was prompted thus to deal with the man is not intimated by the papers, but outside supposition is that Hardy promised to escape any punishment by some technicalities of law.¹⁴⁷

The more obvious explanation is that Hardy’s case was about to be tried, and the mob did not intend for him to escape them a second time.

¹⁴⁶ “A Bandit Band, A Regularly Organized Gang of Negro Thieves in Tennessee Who Stop Only at Murder,” *Courier-Journal*, Mar. 14, 1885; “Thieves Lynched in Tennessee,” *New York Times*, Apr. 15, 1885; “Double Lynching, A Black and a White Man Strung Up by Citizens of Union [sic], Tenn., The Fifth Execution in Thirty Days by Vigilantes,” *St. Louis (MO) Globe-Democrat*, Apr. 15, 1885; “Judge Lynch, Two More Tennessee Desperadoes Hanged by Vigilantes,” *Chicago (IL) Tribune*, Apr. 15, 1885.

¹⁴⁷ Uncaptioned news item, *Hickman Courier*, Mar. 25, 1887.

Hardy had been in custody since June 1886 for the alleged killing of “the Irishman, Tom Murrell.” There are no reports regarding what had happened between the two men, but Hardy allegedly had fled the sawmill only to be captured in Hickman, where he was held in the county jail pending extradition to Tennessee. When it was learned that “a Tennessee mob” of 300 men was headed to Hickman to lynch Hardy, he waived extradition and the Hickman city marshal quietly moved him to Troy. There were no further attempts on Hardy’s life until March 1887, when the mob finally caught up with him on the eve of his trial.¹⁴⁸

Another incident the following year received scant attention despite the fact that the victim’s crime could scarcely even be called an attempted murder. In 1888, a black man was lynched for merely shooting at a white man. The lynching of Henry Jones merited only the following brief mention in the *Hickman Courier*, again without caption:

The negro Henry Jones, who, on Thursday night of last week, shot at Tom Golden, of Fulton, and wounded his horse, was taken from the officers near Troy, brought back to near Woodland Mills, and hung. Jones, it is said bore a bad character, and there was good proof that he had figured extensively in burning and robbing for years.¹⁴⁹

The *Hickman Courier* account mimicked a slightly more detailed version of a story first carried in the *Tennessean* on October 28, 1888. The local newspaper left out of its account the fact that Henry Jones was only 22 years old and that Tom Golden was drunk at the time of the shooting. According to the *Tennessean*, “After going to Woodland Mills [Golden] concluded to return home. He was in a buggy and stopped

¹⁴⁸ Uncaptioned news item, *Hickman Courier*, June 18, 1886.

¹⁴⁹ Uncaptioned news item, *Hickman Courier*, Nov. 2, 1888.

in the middle of the road,” when Jones “shot at him, wounding his horse.” If there is a clue as to why such an incident might warrant a mob lynching, it is in the *Tennessean*’s caption: “A Desperado Lynched.” The *Tennessean* story mentions that a “trial” (actually, a preliminary hearing) had been conducted and that an officer was actually taking Jones to jail when the mob overpowered them. Presumably, the “good proof” of Jones’s “bad character,” was demonstrated at the trial.¹⁵⁰

It is notable that the lynchings of Bill Hardy in 1887 and Henry Jones in 1888 occurred during the peak period for lynchings in the Tri-Counties. During this period, apparently lynchings were so common that they hardly deserved newspaper column inches.

Other lynchings similarly rated little attention in the last decade of the 19th century. One, in 1898, was of so little interest that no one bothered to discover the names of the two African American men who were lynched, although the *Hickman Courier* did provide a sensational headline: “Dastardly Murder, Followed by a Lynching.” In that instance, a white farmer named Alexander Loin had hired two men to row him across the river at Madrid Bend. The two men supposedly murdered Loin and threw his body in the river, although the body was never found. The lack of a corpse did not prevent the mob from seizing two men and extracting confessions from them. Captured at different times, the men met the same fate.¹⁵¹

¹⁵⁰ “A Desperado Lynched,” *Tennessean*, Oct. 28, 1888.

¹⁵¹ “Dastardly Murder, Followed by a Lynching at Bessie, Tenn. near the Missouri Line,” *Hickman Courier*, Dec. 2, 1898; “Murder and Lynching,” *Democrat-Argus* (Caruthersville, MO), Dec. 2, 1898; “Another One Lynched,” *Courier Journal*, Dec. 2, 1898.

Two years later, in 1900, one lynching in Lake County seems to have caused more consternation because of its effect on black labor in the county than concern for the lynching itself. The *Hickman Courier*, in a brief news item, reported only the consequences of the lynching of Early Williams:

A telegram from Tiptonville says the lynching of Early Williams here last week, for the robbery and murder of a peddler, is still causing a great deal of excitement among the cotton pickers. They are leaving by the wagon loads and the farmers are uneasy for fear that so many will leave that they will have to import more in order to get their crops gathered.¹⁵²

Other newspapers around the country gave similar accounts. A short blurb in the *Tiptonville Press* at least gave the dead man's name as Charles Neifeh, and noted that he was a Greek peddler much loved in the community.¹⁵³

The lynching of Joseph Mitchell in May 1898 also received little attention in the *Hickman Courier*. By contrast, the *Paducah Sun* gave it extensive coverage. Indeed, that coverage highlights how protective white communities could be of their own well-regarded African American citizens and also how dangerous it was for African American men to travel outside the communities in which they were known. On May 23, 1898, a black Illinois Central Railroad brakeman from Paducah named Joseph Mitchell was

¹⁵² Uncaptioned news item, *Hickman Courier*, Nov. 2, 1900.

¹⁵³ "Scarcity of Cotton Pickers," *Evening Times* (Washington, DC), Oct. 23, 1900; uncaptioned news item, *Tennessean*, Oct. 23, 1900; "Wagon Loads of Negroes Leaving Tiptonville Neighborhood," *Nashville (TN) Banner*, Oct. 22, 1900. Nativism as well as racism is apparent in the stories about the death of Neifeh, who was described elsewhere in the press as a "Hebrew peddler" or a "Russian peddler." See *Evening Times* article cited above; "Negro Lynched," *Morristown (TN) Republican*, Oct. 13, 1900; uncaptioned news item, *Southeast Missourian* (Portageville, MO), Oct. 25, 1900.

hanged by a mob at Rives in Obion County. According to newspaper reports, “Mitchell had shoved a white boy tramp off a moving train at Rives, and the boy fell on the track, having his legs cut off at the knees.” In early accounts, he was said to have lived long enough to say that Mitchell was his assailant. Mitchell was arrested and, while waiting at the depot to be taken to jail in Union City, a mob threatened to set the depot on fire unless officers turned him over to them. Without ceremony, the mob hanged Mitchell from a tree near the depot.¹⁵⁴

The *Paducah Sun* expressed grave reservations about the guilt of Mitchell. Unlike most lynching reports, the *Sun* article read like an obituary in describing Mitchell as “a well known colored brakeman” who “lived on North Twelfth street in Paducah and “leaves behind a wife.” The article concluded by saying, “Mitchell’s remains arrived in the city this afternoon at 2 o’clock, and will be buried here tomorrow. He had been with the railroad company for a number of years.” The *Sun* also stated: “It is said that the lynching was a cold-blooded murder, as Mitchell had nothing to do with throwing the tramp off the train,” and further that “[t]he conductor substantiates the negro, and the train men say Mitchell was not where he could have thrown the man off.” A subsequent story in the *Sun* provided new information about the arrival of Mitchell’s body in Paducah “in a rude pine box” where it was met by a large crowd at the depot. The article praised Mitchell as “Conductor Foster’s head brakeman” and noted that he was a member of the colored Odd Fellows in Paducah. The article highlighted the fact that the tramp,

¹⁵⁴ “Colored Brakeman Lynched,” *Baltimore (MD) Sun*, May 24, 1898; “Brakeman Lynched,” *Paducah (KY) Sun*, May 23, 1898.

Henry Garner, had not identified Mitchell specifically but had simply said that “the man who shoved him off was the head brakeman.” The *Sun*’s bitter commentary followed: “It was on this that [Joe Mitchell] was strung up.” The *Sun* did not lay blame on Henry Garner, reportedly a well known and liked young man who had recently married a “most charming and beautiful” young lady from Rives. Instead, the blame fell squarely on the mob. As someone at the paper writing under a caption reading “Colored Department” put it: “The satisfaction that comes with hanging a negro was not enough, his body’s riddled with bullets; and the fact that in all probability he was innocent adds the more to the inhuman brutality of the mob.”¹⁵⁵

Occasionally, newspapers claimed that African Americans participated in lynch mobs. In one such instance, Henry Stewart, a black man accused of robbing and killing another black man named Gail Hamilton, as well as robbing a white railroad foreman, was lynched at midnight on June 26, 1899, “by a supposed negro and white mob” who took him from the Fulton city jail.¹⁵⁶ Reports claimed that Stewart was “a bad character” also wanted in Paducah “for malicious cutting.” Stewart’s cohort, Squab Bolin, escaped capture with Stewart, but was arrested several weeks later in Milan, Tennessee. While

¹⁵⁵ “Brakeman Lynched,” *Paducah Sun*, May 23, 1898; “More Details About the Lynching of Joe Mitchell at Rives--Body Mutilated,” *Paducah Sun*, May 24, 1898; “Colored Department,” *Paducah Sun*, May 24, 1898.

¹⁵⁶ It seems unlikely that mobs would have lynched Stewart and Bolin simply because they had killed a black man. The punishment for blacks who killed other blacks was, in general, more severe than when whites killed other whites, but it was not a death sentence. See, for example, “Ed White Given Life Sentence for Murder,” *Hickman Courier*, May 6, 1909; Lucius Avery, twenty-one years, uncaptioned article, *Hickman Courier*, May 13, 1909; Ulysses (or Elisha) Scott, sentenced to penitentiary for life, uncaptioned notation, *Hickman Courier*, Sept. 21, 1911.

trying to get Bolin into the jail, a mob “surrounded and overpowered” the officers, took charge of Bolin and carried him to “a secluded spot back of the Fulton Lumber Company’s plant and hanged him to a tree.” There is no mention of African Americans being part of the mob that lynched Bolin. The *Hickman Courier*’s caption was characteristically brief, “Lynching at Fulton.”¹⁵⁷

The last lynching for murder in Obion County occurred in 1913 and attracted national attention. As was often the case, details of the underlying homicide were conflicting. In the most widely reported account, F. H. McClure, aged 75, heard a noise in his kitchen during the night of March 21, 1913, and, when he went to investigate, found “a negro eating there. The negro refused to leave unless given money whereupon Mr. McClure shot at him.” The man, originally referred to as “Johnson Grenson,” supposedly broke into the house again later that night and shot McClure. In a more sensational account published in the *Nashville Tennessean*, McClure, “one of the most prominent citizens of Union City,” “was aroused by the screams of his daughter” at one o’clock on March 21, 1913. He ran to the door of her room (presumably open) and exchanged gunfire with the attacker, identified correctly as John Grinston. Grinston fled through an open window in the room but dropped a gun with his name engraved on it.

¹⁵⁷ “Henry Stewart Lynched at Fulton, KY., By a Mob of Whites and Negroes,” *Morning Herald* (Lexington, KY), June 28, 1899; “Lynching at Fulton,” *Hickman Courier*, June 30, 1899. Newspapers always made note of reports that lynch mobs were composed of both black and white men, since black participation was viewed as a validation of lynching. See Waldrep, *The Many Faces of Judge Lynch*, 96. Such an attitude suggests, however, that whites felt some degree of guilt about the practice of lynching. Otherwise, it would not have been noteworthy. In any case, black participation was noted in only two or possibly three out of 51 lynchings of African American men.

In all accounts, both Grinston and McClure were wounded, and McClure died the following day. Grinston was found several hours later in the attic of his father's home along with "his blood-stained clothes." According to the *Tennessean*:

The negro was dragged out and taken to jail, where a tremendous crowd assembled in a very short while. One man started to shoot a revolver into the air. The excited crowd seized the negro in front of the jail over the resistance of the sheriff and dragged him to First Street. A cross-examination was held and the negro admitted that he had done the deed. A rope was thrown over a wire cable and the negro was hanged.

Estimates of the crowd size ranged from 500 to 1,000.¹⁵⁸ The cavalier response of the press generally is exemplified by one caption found in the *Morning Tulsa Daily World*: "Good Bye Smoke."¹⁵⁹

In the midst of Grinston's confession, he named an accomplice, one "Red" Taylor, also African American. Later reports the same day stated that Taylor had been arrested in Hickman (one source said Fulton) and that he was being sent back to Union City on the 3:00 p.m. train. According to the *Tennessean*, "About 1,000 citizens gathered at the station to meet the train at Union City, but the negro did not arrive."¹⁶⁰ There are no subsequent reports to suggest that Red Taylor was ever arrested or prosecuted.

¹⁵⁸ "Negro Slayer Of Aged White Man Hanged By Mob As 1,000 Look On," *Buffalo (NY) Times*, Mar. 22, 1913; "Negro Is Strung Up In Middle Of Union City," *Tampa (FL) Tribune*, Mar. 22, 1913; "Negro Hanged By Mob," *Tennessean*, Mar. 22, 1913; "Killed Aged Man--Lynched, Accused Put to Death by Crowd in Union City, Tenn.," *Bamberg (SC) Herald*, Mar. 27, 1913.

¹⁵⁹ "Good Bye Smoke," *Morning Tulsa (OK) Daily World*, Mar. 25, 1913.

¹⁶⁰ "Negro Hanged By Mob," *Tennessean*, Mar. 22, 1913; "Killed Aged Man--Lynched, Accused Put to Death by Crowd in Union City, Tenn.," *Bamberg Herald*, Mar. 27, 1913.

Sexual Assaults

Despite the numerous other alleged offenses which led to lynchings, the rationale given for the practice of lynching was the protection it afforded white women and children who were said to be the natural prey of the black “rapist beast.”¹⁶¹ As previously discussed (see pp. 12-13), this rationale was used by northwest Tennessee’s own U. S. Congressman Finis Garrett in the debates on the Dyer Anti-Lynching Bill of 1922. It was not only Southern politicians, however, who supported this argument but Northern clergy, scientists, and progressive thinkers as well. Legal scholar and historian Barbara Holden-Smith makes this point convincingly:

Perhaps the most damaging myth to grow out of this strain of American racist thought was the avalanche of extremist literature penned, not by racists of the South, but by Northern Biblical scholars. These writers created the myth that the black man was a ‘brute rapist beast,’ lusting after white women. Not just a few members of the race but any black man was a potential rapist, for all blacks were susceptible to attacks of ‘sexual madness’ which compelled them to rape white women. These attacks on white women, Dr. William Lee Howard wrote in a 1903 article published in the respected journal *Medicine*, ‘are evidence of racial instincts that are about as amenable to ethical culture as is the inherent odor of the race.’ Indeed, many Progressive reformers, such as Jane Addams, who

¹⁶¹ Little thought was given to sexual assaults on black women and children. In fact, the sentences for black men convicted of raping black women and children were surprisingly mild when compared to the sentences black men received for intraracial murder. See, for example, “Convicted of Rape,” *Hickman Courier*, July 29, 1909 (17-year old black teenager convicted of raping “a little daughter of Dr. Overby, a negro physician,” received four years in the penitentiary); “Sheriff Comes With Extradition Papers,” *Dayton (OH) Herald*, June 15, 1907 (Wash Stoner convicted of raping Miss Rosie Marshall, “colored, and the prosecution is inspired by the colored people of that section,” sentenced to 10 years in the penitentiary).

were otherwise sympathetic to the concerns of black America, accepted the myth that white Southerners were compelled to lynch black men to protect white women from rape.¹⁶²

Despite these claims, research has shown that the rationale for most lynchings was something other than sexual assault. According to the American Bar Association, fewer than 25 percent of documented African American lynching victims were accused of sexual assault and less than 30 percent were accused of murder.¹⁶³ Percentages in the Tri-Counties were slightly above these averages: approximately 30 percent of lynching victims were accused of sexual assault, and 33 percent were accused of murder or attempted murder. Lake County was remarkable in that all of the reported lynchings were for either alleged sexual assault or murder, with five out of eight incidents based on alleged sexual assaults.

Also remarkable is the fact that only four lynching incidents in the Tri-Counties involved alleged rapes or “outrages” of adult women. Five involved teenagers, and an astonishing seven involved young girls age 12 and under. Regardless of the age of the assault victim, all such incidents led to the cruelest lynchings by the largest mobs and the greatest angry outcry from the general public. Sometimes, at least according to press accounts, blacks joined in the outcry and even participated in the mobs.¹⁶⁴ Often the

¹⁶² Holden-Smith, “Lynching, Federalism, and the Intersection of Race and Gender in the Progressive Era,” 47.

¹⁶³ Jennifer Rae Taylor, “A History of Tolerance for Violence Has Laid the Groundwork for Injustice Today,” *American Bar Association Human Rights Journal*, May 16, 2019, https://www.americanbar.org/groups/crsj/publications/human_rights_magazine_home/black-to-the-future/tolerance-for-violence/, accessed Feb. 10, 2021.

¹⁶⁴ See lynching descriptions of Wyley (pp. 93-94); Wade (pp. 96-97); Charles, Miller, and Smith (pp. 118-119). See also p. 89, fn. 157, regarding blacks participating in mobs.

evidence to support the allegations was sketchy at best and, in the case of young children, inherently unreliable. White communities, alert to the potential misdeeds of lecherous black “brutes,” apparently felt free to jump to conclusions erring in their minds on the side of being safe rather than sorry.

The first sexual assault incident reported in the Tri-Counties occurred in northeast Obion County, near South Fulton, in 1879 and is a good example of what was to follow. The assault victim was a ten or possibly twelve year old girl, the daughter of one of the county magistrates. According to the *Hickman Courier*, the child said she had been hunting eggs in the barn when a farm hand named Jerry Ewing “ravished” her, then said he would kill her if she told anyone. Two weeks later, she reportedly told an older sister, who immediately informed her brother. Accounts of what happened next differ, but the local paper’s story seems most likely. According to the *Hickman Courier*, the brother “started to capture the negro, who attempted to escape, when the brother discharged two shots at him, both taking effect in his arm.” Ewing was taken to a nearby residence for safekeeping. “While being guarded there,” a party of twelve masked men arrived at the house and “took possession of Ewing.” They then shot him to death and threw the body in the Obion River. In the words of the reporter, “Thus ended the days of another beast.”¹⁶⁵

The facts surrounding the next sexual assault in the Tri-Counties are even hazier. In July 1881, a young woman, whose name was reported as “Miss Mollie Curts,” went

¹⁶⁵“Another Lynching,” *Hickman Courier*, Apr. 4, 1879. See uncaptioned news item, *Atlanta Constitution*, Mar. 26, 1879, for an alternative version of the circumstances surrounding Ewing’s death.

missing on her way home from Tiptonville on July 13. A week passed before the remains of her body were found. She was identified by personal items found in the vicinity. According to newspaper reports, an escaped convict named Felix Wyley had “boasted to some of his most intimate acquaintances” that he had raped her and murdered her. The same night that Wyley was arrested, “a number of men” appeared at the jail and demanded that the sheriff turn Wyley over to them. The sheriff convinced them to wait until “a trial” could be held the following day. At the preliminary hearing, proof was presented to show that Wyley, carrying a heavy club, had been seen in the vicinity where the body was found, and that a black woman who did his laundry found clothes “spattered with blood about the time of the murder.” The night after the hearing, a mob, estimated to number between 50 and 150 white and black men, held the sheriff at gunpoint and demanded the keys to Wyley’s cell. They took Wyley to the outskirts of Tiptonville “and hung him up five or six times to force him into a confession.” When he did not oblige, they “finally hung him up and left him, after firing several shots into his body.”¹⁶⁶

A very similar lynching, involving similar facts, occurred again in Tiptonville in 1907. Personal details vary but, according to early reports, a 63-year old widow named Mary Cowan, who lived with her son on a farm near Tiptonville, left home on August 13, 1907, to pick elderberries in the woods. When she did not return home, the area was searched and tracks were found leading from the place “where Mrs. Cowan was known to

¹⁶⁶ “Lynched in Lake,” and “Another Account,” *Memphis Daily Appeal*, July 30, 1881; “Retribution, A Fiendish Crime Fully Avenged,” *Public Ledger* (Memphis, TN), Aug. 3, 1881.

have been picking berries to the banks of the river.” There was no sign of Mrs. Cowan. Newspaper reports stated that Will Clifford, “who had been at work on the farm,” also disappeared on August 13, but, “loaded up on whisky,” he returned “to the vicinity of the suspected crime” on August 15, and was arrested. Clifford was taken to the scene where Mrs. Cowan “was last known to have been alive,” and “admitted that the tracks to the river were his, but denied any knowledge of the disappearance or fate of Mrs. Cowan.” Her body was found later that same day. The *Hickman Courier* apparently divined that Mrs. Cowan had been “overpowered and dragged into a thicket where the black wretch assaulted her,” then strangled her and threw her body into the river. “The woman put up a brave fight as shown by the signs of a terrific struggle.”

On the evening of the 15th, a mob “stormed” the jail. Anticipating a lynching, the sheriff had undertaken a subterfuge which involved telling the mob that he had taken Clifford to Dyersburg for safekeeping, but instead concealing Clifford in a barn away from the jail, and then moving Clifford by car to an undisclosed location. “Farmers along the road saw what was up and telephoned back to Tiptonville.” A mob estimated to number between 100 and 300 men soon gave chase. They caught up with the transport car at Maple, Kentucky, in Fulton County, 18 miles from Tiptonville. According to the *Commercial Courier*, “The crowd took the negro from the sheriff and put him through a sweating process. The confession, however, was not wrung from him until he was about to be hanged.” The *Hickman Courier* quoted the *Memphis News-Scimitar* with approval: “Another black brute committed suicide in Lake County yesterday. He committed the unpardonable offense and selected the rope route to eternity, the noose having been fixed

and the cord jerked by a party of accommodating assistants to the number of about 300.

Sic et is semper.” Though patently untrue, the *Commercial Courier* claimed that

Clifford’s death left only one other African American in the county, “and he is preparing to leave.”¹⁶⁷

The preliminary hearings in the sexual assault cases could last for hours and, perhaps because lynchings were anticipated, all the proof available to both the State and the defendant seems to have been presented.¹⁶⁸ In one case, Wilson Wade, a 22-year old black man, was accused in September 1882 of “committing a nameless outrage” upon an “elderly” 46-year old woman in Kenton, a small town in Obion County. According to the *Tennessean*, “Mrs. Sarah J. Young, a lady of unquestioned good character,” met Wade while walking up the railroad tracks one evening. There was no explanation for why an unescorted woman would have been out on the railroad tracks in the evening. Wade allegedly “drew forth a large knife and demanded her submission to him or her life. She, horror-stricken, yielded to his diabolical designs.” Her suffering was said to be “very serious.” Thirty-five witnesses, many of them character witnesses, testified.

¹⁶⁷ “Negro Farm Hand Charged With Crime,” *Chattanooga (TN) Star*, Aug. 16, 1907; “Mob Lynches Rape Fiend,” *Nashville Banner*, Aug. 16, 1907; “Negro Taken From Sheriff,” *Commercial Courier* (Union City, TN), Aug. 23, 1907; uncaptioned news item, *Hickman Courier*, Aug. 23, 1907; uncaptioned news item, *Hickman Courier*, Aug. 30, 1907. The *Hickman Courier* comment, “Sic et is simper,” appears to be a mangled attempt to express the Latin phrase which translates as “Thus has it always been, and thus shall it ever be.”

¹⁶⁸ A preliminary hearing was (and is) for the purpose of requiring the State to present sufficient evidence of probable cause in order to bind a case over to the grand jury. Under normal circumstances, a defendant would not be expected to put on proof at the preliminary hearing.

Mrs. Young's testimony included a positive identification of Wade, at which point Wade was said to have "exhibited evidence of guilt in his looks."

At several points during the day, local officials made appeals to the crowd to allow the law to run its course, but, by the end of testimony, the mob apparently had heard enough. According to the *New York Times*:

At 11 o'clock at night a body of from 100 to 500 men came into town, and seized the Police and disarmed them. The mob proceeded to the Courthouse where the prisoner was being guarded by about 15 men, took the guards by surprise, and disarmed them. The Sheriff and one his deputies were present but were powerless.

The mob took Wade to a road one half mile from town and hanged him "to a small elm tree in a field near the road." The *Courier-Journal* claimed to have heard reports that "the best citizens of the city and county" were a part of the mob and that the lynching was "generally approved by both races."

Subsequent events suggest that any notion of the black community having agreed with the lynching was puffery. An inquest was held at the site the following morning, and the body was then returned to town where it was "tendered" "to the colored race," which apparently included Wade's father. The *St. Louis Globe-Democrat* reported, "They said boldly: 'You have hung him, now you may bury him.'"

In a separate dispatch to the *Globe-Democrat* from Union City, locals claimed there were reports that "the negroes would attempt to burn the city . . . to avenge the death of Wade." Rumors circulated that "crowds of negroes" were gathering at the fairgrounds and "armed citizens are patrolling the city in all directions, the Mayor having

called out everyone that can raise firearms.” As always when the black community protested white action, whites responded with a threat: “It is to be hoped that the negroes will not attempt [to burn the city], but if they do they will certainly meet with a warm reception.”¹⁶⁹ No organized protest followed.

In the aftermath of the lynching, there was little condemnation in the press of the mob’s precipitous behavior. Although the subcaption of the article that ran in the Union City’s *Globe-Democrat* read “Union City, Tenn. Disgraced by Mob Violence,” the *Tennessean* was more equivocal: “We all disapprove mob violence, yet he got his just desserts. The law is too slow for such affairs, and when the virtue of one of our women is so cruelly attacked, the best of our men will not hesitate to answer the call.”¹⁷⁰ The editor of the *Hickman Courier*, as ever, wholly endorsed the actions of the mob and took the opportunity, in fact, to extol the practice in general:

It is the fixed, unalterable law of public opinion that he who commits this fiendish crime shall die, and that without the benefit of judge, jury, or clergy. This law is not printed or written in our books, but is engraved on our consciences, and it is right. The Union City people acted right, and their conduct will be approved by the best public sentiment everywhere. Such miscreants must die, and die quick, in order to strike terror to depraved humanity. ‘Is he guilty beyond a doubt,’ is the only question the people of a community should deliberately and thoroughly investigate, and this

¹⁶⁹ “A Brutal Outrage,” *Courier-Journal*, Sept. 5, 1882; “Lynch Law In Tennessee, A Colored Ruffian Hanged By A Mob For An Outrage,” *New York Times*, Sept. 7, 1882; “A Brute Lynched,” *Courier-Journal*, Sept. 7, 1882; “Lynch Law, Union City, Tenn. Disgraced by Mob Violence,” and “The City Patrolled,” *St. Louis Globe-Democrat*, Sept. 7, 1882.

¹⁷⁰ “A Fiend’s Fate, The Union City Ravisher Taken from Jail and Lynched,” *Tennessean*, Sept. 7, 1882.

being answered in the affirmative, then let the punishment come swift and terrible -- and the swifter and more terrible the better for society.¹⁷¹

The white community in the Tri-Counties seems to have taken the editor's message to heart, because, for the next fifty years, they adhered to his message in every reported instance of even attempts at sexual assault -- as long as the depraved miscreant was black.

In 1883, a mob lynched Henry Colbert, who was accused of an attempted assault in which he never even made it into the assault victim's house. The attempt on Mrs. Lizzie Prather, widow, who lived "near Cayce station" outside Hickman, is a twisted story allegedly set in motion by a white man named Houston Woodall. According to the story told by Colbert's partner Pete Hurt, Colbert and Hurt, both African American, were hired by Woodall to do "all the damage they could to Mrs. Prather." Colbert and Hurt went to Mrs. Prather's house on the night of March 6, and first tried to gain entry by pretending to be Prather's father. When that effort failed, they attempted to pry the front door open with an ax blade. She screamed, and they ran. Suspicion immediately fell upon the two men, and Hurt was questioned but released, then fled the country. An African American man in the neighborhood named Mose Wilford told authorities Hurt had confessed to him that Hurt and Colbert had been hired by Woodall to attack Prather. Colbert, still in the area, was arrested and, following a preliminary hearing, confined to jail. Stories circulated that Colbert had previously been tried for rape in Ballard County, Kentucky, but had been acquitted on the basis of an alibi.

¹⁷¹ "Sure Death," *Hickman Courier*, Sept. 15, 1882.

On the evening of June 15, 1883, “a body of masked men,” estimated at between 20 and 30 in number, told the jailor that they were from Fulton and had some prisoners they needed to put in jail. The jailor, thinking the prisoners might be the Ogles who had recently been arrested for an attack on the Fulton city marshall, opened the door to the masked men.¹⁷² Once inside, the mob demanded to be taken to Colbert’s cell, where they “threw a noose over Colbert’s head and around his neck, and led him out of the jail.” Colbert was never seen again. According to the *Hickman Courier*, “Our citizens very generally regret the resort to mob law, but a very large majority think that Colbert deserved the fate received.” The *Tennessean* was snide: “The prevailing opinion is that Henry has gone to make a little angel through the waters of the turbid Mississippi.”¹⁷³

Hurt, meanwhile, was believed to have fled to Osceola, Arkansas. Again, according to the *Hickman Courier*, “It is more than probable that by the time this paper is printed, that Hurt has been captured and swung from a limb.” Hurt was, in fact, captured in Memphis and returned to Hickman for trial, at which he entered a plea of guilty. Defying the odds, he was not lynched. Instead, the city marshall arrested Woodall on the basis of evidence provided by Hurt. Following a preliminary hearing, Woodall’s case was bound over to the grand jury. Unlike Hurt, Woodall was able to make bail, but, upon his release, he was immediately arrested again for carrying concealed weapons which he

¹⁷² The Fulton city marshall’s battle with the Ogles is discussed at p. 54. Why men legitimately bringing prisoners to the jail would need to wear masks is an unanswered question.

¹⁷³ “The Mob Takes Henry Colbert From Jail,” *Hickman Courier*, June 15, 1883; “Colbert’s Crime, Judge Lynch Makes His Appearance at Hickman, Ky.,” *Tennessean*, June 12, 1883.

had had on him when originally arrested. He again made bond. The *Courier* reported that there was “a very general apprehension” Woodall would be lynched, but “he took his departure for parts unknown the same night he was released from jail.” After multiple continuances, Woodall’s case was dismissed on a technicality in February 1884, and he was not reindicted because Pete Hurt recanted his testimony. Hurt, still in jail, was indicted for perjury, but there is no record of his ever having been lynched.¹⁷⁴

After Henry Colbert’s lynching, there were a number of 1800s lynchings in the Tri-Counties for sexual assault which, as with certain murder cases, merited little attention in the local press. John Vanderford was lynched on July 18, 1887, in Fulton for allegedly having assaulted a six year old girl. According to oblique news reports, Vanderford was arrested in Fulton, Kentucky, on a warrant out of Gibson County, Tennessee. Neither Vanderford nor the child had any apparent connection to Fulton; however, when it was made public that Vanderford was wanted for sexual assault, a mob went to the jail and seized him. He was hanged from “the nearest tree,” and, reportedly, “helped to pull himself up.”¹⁷⁵ It should be noted that there are no local newspaper accounts of this lynching, and efforts to locate reports of an assault in Gibson County

¹⁷⁴ “Colbert’s Crime,” *Tennessean*, June 12, 1883; “The Trial of Henry Colbert, A Dastardly and Fiendish Purpose, The Negroes Charged and a White Man Implicated,” and “The Mob Takes Henry Colbert From Jail, Probably Hung, Shot or Drowned,” *Hickman Courier*, June 15, 1883; uncaptioned news item, *Hickman Courier*, June 22, 1883; “Hickman, KY., The Trial of Pete Hurt and E. H. Woodall,” *Tennessean*, June 24, 1883; uncaptioned news item, *Hickman Courier*, July 13, 1883; uncaptioned news item, *Hickman Courier*, Feb. 29, 1884.

¹⁷⁵ “He Helped the Lynchers Lynch Him,” *Lancaster New Era* (Lancaster, PA), July 20, 1887; “He Helped the Lynchers,” *Evening Bulletin* (Maysville, KY), July 21, 1887.

matching this description proved futile. It may also be significant that reports of rapes, assaults, and murders of “white girls” during the summer of 1887 approached epidemic proportions. A cursory review of national newspapers turned up such reports in at least 16 cities, including one that sparked racial riots in Oak Ridge, Louisiana.¹⁷⁶ White hysteria may have led to many lynchings and even false reports of lynchings.

In another example of barebones reporting, the *Hickman Courier* gave the following account of an October 1892 lynching:

A colored man named Alex Bell was hung and his
body riddled with bullets, near Troy, Monday, by a mob.
His crime was entering the house of a widow lady,
Mrs. J. S. Jones, and assaulting one of her daughters.
It is said that he confessed his guilt.

The *Memphis Appeal-Avalanche* provided a few more details, but even its story began with a tone of weary resignation: “Another rape fiend has paid the penalty of his crime.” According to the Memphis paper, Alex Bell had broken into the home of Mrs. Jones, “a widow with two daughters,” entered the daughters’ bedroom, and “assaulted” one of them apparently after they had gone to bed. When the daughters began screaming, Bell fled. How or even whether they knew him or got a good look at him is not mentioned. Bell was arrested the following day but escaped, then arrested again the next day. As the sheriff was taking him to jail, he “was met by about 100 men, who took Bell and hanged

¹⁷⁶ Cities included New York, NY, Lexington, GA, Towson, MD, Leonardtown, MD, Louisville, KY, Union City, TN, Nashville, TN, Bibb, AL, Kaufman, TX, Tarrboro, NC, Mississippi City, MS, Little Rock, AR, Centralia, IL, Hard Times, MS, Fulton, KY, and Oak Ridge, LA. See, for example, “A Deadly Conflict Between Whites and Negroes in Louisiana,” *Abbeville (LA) Press and Banner*, July 13, 1887.

him to a tree, afterward riddling his body with bullets.” The story concludes: “Miss Jones was not injured, aside from a few scratches.”¹⁷⁷

Sometimes, especially in cases where only an attempt was alleged, the lynching even became a laughing matter for the press. The lynching of Jerry Smith in Tiptonville is an example. On April 11, 1888, “information was given to the authorities” (source unspecified) that Smith had attempted to rape the 12-year old daughter of a local white farmer in Lake County. A special dispatch to the *Memphis American* carried in the *Nashville Tennessean*, began: “A dancing bee, which afforded amusement and some satisfaction to all present, with the exception of the principal, took place yesterday morning on the outskirts of the thriving little village of Tiptonville.” A tongue-in-cheek account followed:

The Constable went in search of the scoundrel, and, after a race through the overflowed bottoms, during which both stood a good chance of being drowned, succeeded in capturing him and placed him in jail. Yesterday was court day at Tiptonville, and the prisoner was to be tried, but Judge Lynch arrived in town just before daybreak. The impromptu jurists convened the court, tried, convicted and executed the culprit before the legitimate tribunal was called to order. The body of the lascivious negro was seen yesterday morning about a quarter of a mile back from the bank of the river, suspended from a tree. As is usual with Judge Lynch and his followers, their work was done without leaving a trace of their identity.¹⁷⁸

¹⁷⁷ Uncaptioned news item, *Hickman Courier*, Oct. 7, 1892; “Riddled The Black Ravisher, How Obion County People Avenged Miss Jones,” *Memphis (TN) Appeal-Avalanche*, Oct. 5, 1892.

¹⁷⁸ “A Negro Lynched, Jerry Smith Hanged for Attempting to Outrage a Little Girl,” *Tennessean*, Apr. 13, 1888.

Newspaper accounts of yet another lynching for attempted “outrage” of a child are so sketchy that it is difficult to determine who the assault victim was and whether the lynching actually occurred. The best evidence suggests that, in November 1891, a “16-year-old negro” named Joe Mitchell (not to be confused with Joseph Mitchell, lynched in 1898, see pp. 86-87) attacked a young girl in McConnell, Tennessee, which is in Obion County but near the Weakley County line. The most detailed account, found in a special dispatch to the *St. Louis Globe-Dispatch*, identifies the girl as the 11-year old daughter of a widow identified as Mrs. McMahon. Other sources identified her as the daughter of Mr. Wm. Mayfield. According to the *Globe-Dispatch*, when the child screamed, “the negro choked her, but became frightened and ran off.” How or where Mitchell was captured is not mentioned, but he was said to have “confessed his crime.” At this point, accounts of the lynching itself diverge. In one story, he was “taken from an officer near Fulton, Ky. . . . and lynched in a magistrate’s yard.” In another story written from Paducah, Kentucky, he was strung up by a mob “here” who had taken him from a magistrate’s office. Other newspapers picking up the story apparently took this to mean the lynching actually occurred in Paducah. The *St. Louis Globe-Democrat* account rules out Paducah, but makes the precise location of the lynching no more obvious.

Reading all the accounts in conjunction with each other, it seems most likely that Mitchell was captured and lynched somewhere near McConnell -- possibly on the Weakley County side, but almost as likely in Obion County -- on November 10, 1891. Significantly, in one of the few instances in which a lynching victims’ family was mentioned, the St. Louis paper noted that Mitchell’s parents, who lived in Fulton, went to

McConnell to recover his body. Fulton County's own newspaper did not bother to investigate and report the story accurately, but instead carried a hybridized version in an uncredited and uncaptioned news item:

JOSEPH MITCHELL, a Negro, was strung up at Paducah a few days ago, by a mob, who took him away from an officer in a magistrate's office. The Negro had assaulted Mr. Wm. Mayfield's daughter.¹⁷⁹

The press took more interest in the lynching of Joseph Bumpass on August 30, 1904, apparently because the method employed by the mob was unique: Bumpass was drowned. The *Paducah Sun*'s headline read: "Lynched With Water Instead Of Burned; Hickman Mob Drowns a Negro Charged With Assault . . . Unusual Way of Disposing of Prisoner." The cause for lynching is less clear. According to the *Sun*, Bumpass had "attempted an assault" on 13-year old Topsy Clay, daughter of Tuck Clay, living with the family of Henry Hawkins at the time of the incident. On August 23, the child walked to a place near the Hawkins home "in the Bacon neighborhood, two miles from Shucks Switch," to pick some tomatoes. The location was apparently in Obion County. The *Sun* reported that she was returning to the Hawkins house when she was "assaulted by the negro. She screamed loudly and the negro escaped." When she got home, she reported to Hawkins what had happened to her. Hawkins reportedly "shouldered his gun" and went in search of Bumpass. When found, he was taken back to the house and Topsy identified him as her assailant. Bumpass "protested his innocence" and was allowed to

¹⁷⁹ "Negro Boy Lynched in Tennessee," *St. Louis Globe-Democrat*, Nov. 12, 1891; "Negro Taken from an Officer and Lynched," *Indianapolis (IN) Journal*, Nov. 13, 1891; uncaptioned news item, *Tennessean*, Nov. 13, 1891; uncaptioned news item, *Hickman Courier*, Nov. 20, 1891.

leave, but “[c]itizens of the community took the matter in hand and began a search for the negro.” He was captured again and taken to Hickman. Again, according to the *Sun*, “Many are surprised that the negro escaped lynching then.” Bumpass waived extradition and was remanded to the custody of the sheriff, presumably to await transport to Union City.

In a distinct echo of Henry Colbert’s lynching in 1883 (see pp. 99-100), at around 1:00 a.m. on August 30, 1904, men appeared at the jail claiming they were delivering “a negro prisoner” to the jailor. The jailor let them in and went to get the keys “to the negro side of the jail.” When he returned, five men were pointing their revolvers at him. They took Bumpass from his cell without allowing him to dress. “A rope was tied around his neck and he was taken directly towards the river. The men returned in a few minutes without the negro . . . It is accepted that the negro was taken out in the river and dropped overboard.”¹⁸⁰

In an odd coda to the lynching, it seems that J. H. Hawkins felt his honor had been impugned by the *Paducah Sun*. In response, he wrote a letter, printed in the *Hickman Courier*, to set the record straight. Mr. Hawkins wanted to correct the report that he had caught Bumpass and then turned him loose “to go his way.” Hawkins wanted “the citizens of this community and the readers of that paper to know that I am not that kind of a man.” According to Hawkins, another man named Levy Spillers had caught Bumpass, taken pity on him, and let him go. Hawkins said that as soon as he learned what had

¹⁸⁰ “Lynched With Water Instead Of Burned, Hickman Mob Drowns a Negro Charged With Assault, He Was Taken From the Jail at the Point of Pistols and Killed, Unusual Way Of Disposing Of Prisoner,” *Paducah Sun*, Aug. 30, 1904.

happened, he did indeed shoulder his gun, track down Bumpass, and take him to jail.

“But,” he said:

[I]f we had given him justice we should have never allowed anyone to have had eyes on him again. I want every reader of your paper to know that I am not that kind of a man, that *I am a white man with a white principal [sic], and would as soon die fighting for my race as to die a natural death.* If I had my will they would all be in the bottom of eternal h--- before tomorrow night. It is alright to have a law and I am in favor of law but it does not seem that the law stops an outrage, and when it does not why should we not have one of our own? He is now dead, d---d and delivered and ought to have been dead before he was born.

He signed the letter, “Yours respectfully, J. H. Hawkins.”¹⁸¹

Hawkins’s letter restated the principle already expressed by the *Hickman Courier* in its 1882 editorial (discussed at pp. 98-99): when the written law was inconsistent with justice, justice should, by right, prevail. Justice was in the hands of the people, and the people would determine when and how it should be executed. Clearly, this was the guiding principle of the many men who composed the lynch mobs throughout post-Reconstruction and the early Jim Crow eras. Hawkins went one step further, however, and stated what had gone unstated by the *Hickman Courier*. He made it clear that his guiding principle was for whites only. In words that must have resonated with all those who had survived the Civil War, he spoke of “fighting” for his race -- preferring death to the sacrifice of his “white principal.” Indeed, he wished for the death of all those who were not white, and damned them all to hell.

¹⁸¹ “A Communication,” *Hickman Courier*, Sept. 10, 1904.

Not every man in the county agreed with Hawkins's sense of justice. In 1910, Bob Bruce and Will Sharp, both African American, were charged with attempt to assault two daughters of Jack Downing, who lived near Conansville, a community in Lake County. Newspaper accounts stated that the men had broken into the house at night and entered the girls' bedroom. One of the girls ran screaming to her father's room. Sharp "fled but Bruce grabbed the other girl and had hold of her when her father ran into the room." Bruce let go of her and escaped, "but cut his arm in getting through a window and lost his cap." Bruce and Sharp, having worked on various farms in the area for a number of years, were apparently well known in the community and were soon captured. "Their captors swung Bruce up in a cotton gin and he confessed." In an unusually brave and conscientious act, and noting that the girls had not actually been hurt, Jack Downing "urged that the law be allowed to take its course." The mob complied with his wishes and called the sheriff, who placed the men in custody. That night the sheriff learned there were rumors of the mob reforming, and he attempted to move Bruce and Sharp into hiding, but the mob found them, took the men and hanged them both on one cypress tree a short distance from Tiptonville. The Memphis *News-Democrat* noted that the scene of the lynching was 100 yards from one that had occurred two years ago (likely referring to the Stinebacks' lynchings).¹⁸²

¹⁸² "Bob Bruce and Will Sharp, Farm Hands, Pay the Penalty Of Attack On Two Little Daughters of Jack Downing, Near Conansville, Sunday Night," *Nashville Banner*, Sept. 13, 1910; "Two Negroes Hanged By Mob Near Tiptonville," *Tennessean*, Sept. 14, 1910; "Two Negroes Lynched By Quiet Mob," *Memphis News-Democrat*, Sept. 14, 1910; "Hanged To Tree," *Commercial* (Union City, TN), Sept. 16, 1910. Note the *Commercial*, the nearest newspaper, identifies Bob Bruce as Bob McFadden.

The last lynching to have occurred in the Tri-Counties was at Union City in April 1931. The story was covered by newspapers across the country at the time, but the most cogent account was provided in 2007 by Professor Thomas Pressly, Professor Emeritus at the University of Washington, who witnessed the lynching as a 12-year old boy. In a feature for the website BLACKPAST.ORG: REMEMBERED & RECLAIMED, under the title “Eyewitness to Terror: The Lynching of a Black Man in Obion County, Tennessee in 1931,” Dr. Pressly explained that he had ridden with an older teenage friend one afternoon from their hometown of Troy in Obion County to the county seat of Union City to buy parts for the friend’s car. They were unaware that anything out of the ordinary was going on in Union City, but, when they passed the courthouse, they saw that the grounds were filled with people and that a black man’s body was hanging from a tree. In Pressly’s words:

We were told by people in the crowd that the lynched man was in in his early twenties, and that on the previous night, he had entered the bedroom and clutched the neck of a young lady prominent as a singer and pianist, the main entertainer at the new radio station recently established in Union City as the first station in Obion County. The young lady said she had fought off her attacker and severely scratched his face before he fled from her house. Within hours the sheriff and his deputy, using bloodhounds, had tracked down a black man who had scratches on his face. They then brought him before the young woman who identified him as her assailant. Convinced he had the attacker, the sheriff put him in the jail, which occupied the top floor of the Court House. Before long, however, a mob of whites gathered, broke into the jail, overpowered the sheriff and deputy, and hung the victim from the limb of the tree near the jail. . . . I was later told that he was a

high school graduate which was unusual for blacks or whites in my county in that period, and that he knew the family of the woman attacked.¹⁸³

Not only was George Smith a high school graduate but his mother was a school teacher and his father had worked for 15 years for the Mobile and Ohio Railroad Company. The family owned their own home and rented a farm of about 35 acres. None of the immediate family had ever been accused of any crime. Their ties to the community and reputation, however, made no difference.¹⁸⁴

Smith was alleged to have attempted break-ins of two homes on the same night, but the focus was always on the “young lady” and budding “artist on the staff of WOBT,” identified as “Miss Ada Howard, daughter of Mr. and Mrs. Benjamin S. Howard.” Howard was reported to be “uninjured.” She later told the *Sun-Democrat* that she didn’t “want to talk about the affair,” then said, “I know it was awful. But I’m not hurt -- not a bit.” Initially, she was unable to identify George Smith with any assurance and explained that it was too dark to get a look at him. The *Sun-Democrat* quoted her as saying, “[I]t may have been a white man.”

Smith was arrested that same day on the strength of the bloodhounds’ path to Smith’s family home and the scratches on his face. Once it became known that he was under arrest, “people began filling the court house yard.” The sheriff, the mayor, and,

¹⁸³ Thomas Pressly, “Eyewitness to Terror: The Lynching of a Black Man in Obion County, Tennessee in 1931,” BLACKPAST.ORG website, at <https://www.blackpast.org/african-american-history/eyewitness-terror-lynching-black-man-obion-county-tennessee-1931/>, accessed July 30, 2007.

¹⁸⁴ Vandiver, *Lethal Punishment*, 41.

strikingly, George Smith's father made speeches to the crowd encouraging them to wait for proof that Smith was the perpetrator.

Smith was later taken to the Howard's house to be identified by the young woman, and she claimed to identify him based on the sound of his voice. Howard's father then made his own speech, wherein he simply asked the crowd not "to do anything rash near the house."¹⁸⁵

By the time Smith was back in jail, the size of the crowd -- composed of men, women, and children -- had increased dramatically. "Suddenly, at 1:30 p.m., a band of 30 men armed with sledges, came out of the crowd and walked directly toward the entrance of the courthouse." They pounded their way in and, within moments, returned with Smith, "who was battling terrifically. Someone struck him a full blow across the side of the head with a blunt instrument," and he "slumped into the arms of his captors."¹⁸⁶ His body was cut down 45 minutes after the hanging, and, in an unusual move -- possibly out of respect for the Smith family -- the body was taken to a mortuary.¹⁸⁷

In the immediate aftermath of the lynching, Smith's family wrote to and obtained the support of the NAACP, who sent one of its top white investigators, Howard Kester, to investigate the circumstances surrounding the lynching. Dr. Margaret Vandiver provides an excellent summary of Kester's report to the NAACP in her book *Lethal Punishment*.

¹⁸⁵ "Two Union City Homes Invaded," *Nashville Banner*, Apr. 18, 1931; "Enraged Mob Lynches Negro," *Nashville Banner*, Apr. 19, 1931.

¹⁸⁶ "Man Hanged After Radio Blues Singer Accosted In Home," *Paducah Sun-Democrat*, Apr. 19, 1931.

¹⁸⁷ "Negro Hanged At Union City," *Knoxville (TN) Journal*, Apr. 19, 1931.

According to Vandiver, a grand jury was convened to investigate the case in May and June of 1931, but no indictments were returned. Kester arrived in Union City in August 1931 only to discover that no one was willing to talk about what had happened in April. Without new information, the NAACP abandoned the case.¹⁸⁸

The grand jury investigation in George Smith's case forms a bookend with the grand jury investigation of the first Obion County lynchings at Madrid Bend in 1869. Along with the exceptional investigation into the lynching of Quentin Rankin (discussed at pp. 145-147), these are the only known cases in which an Obion County grand jury ever investigated a lynching.¹⁸⁹ George Smith's lynching is also one of only two cases in the Tri-Counties in which there was a report of extreme brutality in connection with a lynching (see lynching of Ike Fitzgerald at pp. 116-117). Although unreported in any press accounts, Howard Kester's report to the NAACP noted that, according to his sources, the mob had dragged Smith behind a car all over town. "He was probably dead before they hanged him as two enormous holes were in his chest and head."¹⁹⁰

There had not been a lynching in Obion County since 1913, and none in the Tri-Counties since 1918. Why 1931? There are several likely explanations which probably overlapped in the minds of the white community. First, the Tennessee legislature was

¹⁸⁸ Vandiver, *Lethal Punishment*, 40-42. See also Robert F. Martin, *Howard Kester and the Struggle for Social Justice in the South: 1904-1977* (Charlottesville: University Press of Virginia, 1991), 71.

¹⁸⁹ "Obion Grand Jury May Probe Negro Mobbing," *Tennessean*, Apr. 23, 1931; "Obion Grand Jury Told to Probe Lynching of Negro" *Tennessean*, May 6, 1931.

¹⁹⁰ Vandiver, *Lethal Punishment*, 42, quoting Howard Kester to Walter White (NAACP Executive Secretary), Sept. 5, 1931, NAACP Papers, sec. 7, ser. A, reel 18, frames 137-139.

seriously entertaining the possibility of finally passing an anti-lynching bill, which may have sparked a backlash.¹⁹¹ Second, there may have been a regional hysteria provoked by sensationalized press accounts of recent alleged attempted rapes and murder. In March 1931, two young black men, wanted in Hickman for the assaults of two white women, had been arrested for murder in Louisville, Kentucky. In a separate case in mid-April 1931, a 28-year old black man, who had escaped both the police and a mob in neighboring Weakley County in 1927, had been arrested at Hickman for an attempted sexual assault across the river in Mississippi County, Missouri. And, on the same day George Smith was lynched, a black man who had been arrested for shooting an officer at Humboldt, Tennessee, was saved from a mob by a sheriff's wife at Huntingdon, Tennessee. In addition to these regional events, the Scottsboro, Alabama trial of nine black teenage boys for the rape of two white girls had just concluded.¹⁹² It seems likely that, as the newspapers' often said, "spirits ran high." For whatever reason, it was the only lynching to have occurred in the Tri-Counties since 1918, and it was the last lynching to occur anywhere within the region.¹⁹³

¹⁹¹ "Curb on Lynching Sought In Bills Given Assembly," *Tennessean*, Jan. 27, 1931; "Anti-Lynching Measure," *Nashville Banner*, Feb. 7, 1931; "Taylor Urges Support of Anti-Lynching Law," *Tennessean*, Mar. 6, 1931.

¹⁹² "Fulton County To Claim Pair Held In Louisville Jail," *Paducah Sun-Democrat*, Apr. 13, 1931; "Silk Underwear and Scars Lead To Jones' Arrest," *Paducah Sun-Democrat*, Apr. 21, 1931; "Sheriff's Wife Outwits Mob As They Storm Jail, Saves Life of Man Held For Crime," *Paducah Sun-Democrat*, Apr. 19, 1931; "Death Penalty Jury's Verdict," *Nashville Banner*, Apr. 8, 1931.

¹⁹³ There were other lynchings for alleged sexual assaults in the Tri-Counties. See subsequent section, "Victims Taken From Custody and A Few Who Were Not," pp. 106-113.

The Significance Of Masks

Whether or not lynch mobs were masked seems to have depended largely upon two factors: 1) whether the mob was composed of members of a discrete brotherhood, such as the Klan or the Night Riders; and 2) the size of the mob. The lynching of Jerry Ewing by “twelve masked men” for a sexual assault in Fulton County in 1879 (see p. 93) is unusual in its specificity and suggests the lynching may have been carried out by the Klan. Similarly, Will Butcher, the troublesome drunk lynched in Hickman in 1895 (see p. 72), apparently met his end at the hands of a band who at least wanted to send a message of unity. Lying near Butcher’s body, which was found on the riverbank “riddled with bullets,” were nine white masks, “showing conclusively that he had met his death at the hands of a band of white caps.”¹⁹⁴

Otherwise, the smaller the mob, the more likely the men were to be masked. The wearing of a mask suggests the mob did not expect broad community support for its actions. For example, Toler and Farrington, the white men lynched for robbery and murder of a law enforcement officer in Union City in 1871 (see pp. 74-75), were taken from jail by “a squad of disguised men.” In an exceptional case, Charlie Lewis, the World War I veteran lynched in 1918 (see pp. 81-82), was taken by a mob of approximately 75 men in which “[e]very man wore a mask.”¹⁹⁵ That is by far the largest number of masked men reported in the Tri-Counties and reflects a certain degree of organization in the decision to lynch Lewis as well as a hint that the men knew lynching a

¹⁹⁴ “Will Butcher Killed,” *Hickman Courier*, Sept. 6, 1895; “Riddled, End of Disorderly Hickman Negro,” *Courier Journal*, Sept. 3, 1895.

¹⁹⁵ “Mob Batters Down Jail Doors And Hangs Negro,” *Courier-Journal*, Dec. 17, 1918.

veteran -- even an African American one -- would be harshly criticized. Clearly the large mobs -- those that developed during courtroom proceedings and especially in the later Obion County cases -- felt no need for the anonymity of masks since the people making up those mobs rightly or wrongly saw themselves as carrying out the will of the community.

It is also noteworthy that, with the exception of the Night Riders, no one, over the course of 57 lynchings in 60 years, was ever publicly identified as being a member of a mob. Inquests were conducted after every lynching, and the conclusion was invariably "died at the hands of persons unknown." If grand jury investigations, which were always conducted in private, uncovered the names of mob members, they were revealed only once -- in a case of mistaken identity (see Dooley lynching at pp. 119-120). Otherwise, the only time the public ever seemed interested in identifying members of a mob was after the Stineback lynching in Tiptonville during the Night Rider period when the entire region had had enough of mob violence and unwanted publicity.

Victims Taken From Custody And A Few Who Were Not

It is significant that, in almost all cases, victims were taken from law enforcement officers either at the jail or en route to jail. Time and time again, victims were either removed from their jail cells -- almost always during late night hours -- or grabbed from law enforcement officers who were often trying to shield prisoners by moving them from a known location to a safely distant one. In fact, as previously discussed, one such incident was partially responsible for the creation of Lake County. In the 1869 incident in which five African American farm workers were lynched (see pp. 68-71), the farm

workers were being marched to the Obion County Jail at Troy, which was 25 miles from Madrid Bend and on the opposite side of Reelfoot Lake. The mob found the men walking on the road, and all were shot “through and through with pistol bullets.”¹⁹⁶ At the time, it was noted that it was too far and too dangerous to arrest and transport prisoners from Madrid Bend to Troy for court proceedings, and, six months later, the counties were divided so that Tiptonville became the county seat of Lake County.¹⁹⁷

In several incidents in Obion and Lake County, victims were actually taken from the courtroom during proceedings or, in one instance, literally strung up in the courtroom. John Thomas, charged with having raped a 10-year old girl in April 1887, appeared in Obion County Criminal Court for a preliminary hearing during which the child testified and identified Thomas as her assailant. While the prosecuting attorney was reading the law on punishment aloud to the packed courtroom, a man cried, “That’s enough.” Thomas was seized by the crowd, a rope placed around his neck, and he was drawn up over a beam in the ceiling of the courtroom. According to one newspaper account, “At exactly 11:40 a.m., the fiend was hauled up by hundreds of hands and the rope made secure around a post. Death ensued instantly from strangulation.”¹⁹⁸

¹⁹⁶ “Wholesale Butchery . . . Five Negroes Subsequently Slaughtered by a Mob,” *Tennessean*, Nov. 27, 1869; “A Bloody War In Obion County,” *Nashville (TN) Union and American*, Nov. 27, 1869.

¹⁹⁷ “A Much Needed Law,” *Memphis Daily Appeal*, Feb. 6, 1870; “Law And Order,” *Memphis Daily Appeal*, Dec. 7, 1869; Hayes, *Historic Reelfoot Lake Region*, 177.

¹⁹⁸ “Lynched In Court, Summary Punishment of a Child-Ravisher at Union City, Tenn.,” *St. Louis Globe-Democrat*, Apr. 14, 1887.

In another incident, which occurred in March 1901, Ike Fitzgerald, described poignantly as a fisherman “mending his nets” on the banks of Reelfoot Lake, was tried at Tiptonville in Lake County for assaulting a nineteen year old woman. The sheriff was credited with keeping Fitzgerald safe until after Fitzgerald’s trial, but, on March 16, 1901, when the jury was unable to agree on punishment (11 for hanging, one for life imprisonment), a large mob seized Fitzgerald before the sheriff could get him out of the courthouse and hanged him “to the first tree found available.” At least one regional newspaper blamed the lynching on the failure of the jury to agree. In reporting the Fitzgerald lynching, the *Hopkinsville Kentuckian* claimed the failure to reach a unanimous verdict “caused the citizens in the court room to take the negro and execute him at once,” and “[t]he growing indisposition of juries to enforce the laws of the land is one of the direct causes of lynch law.”¹⁹⁹

According to the *Washington Times*, “Before [Fitzgerald] was strung up the negro was mutilated, and the pieces cut from his body were exhibited on Sunday by a man present at the lynching.” The African American community was said to be “greatly wrought up over the mutilation and lynching,” and “[m]eetings were held on Sunday and Monday, but what action was taken is not known.”²⁰⁰ What was known, however, was that three nights after the lynching, Tiptonville’s entire business district caught fire, and

¹⁹⁹ “Vigilant Sheriff Saves a Villain,” *Tennessean*, Feb. 3, 1901; “The Mob Was Fooled,” *Courier-Journal*, Feb. 3, 1901; “Jury Fails to Agree; Mob Hangs Negro,” *New York Times*, Mar. 18, 1901; “Mob Agreed, Lynched Negro When Jury Couldn’t Agree,” *Knoxville (TN) Sentinel*, Mar. 18, 1901; uncaptioned news item, *Hopkinsville (KY) Kentuckian*, Mar. 19, 1901.

²⁰⁰ “Burned By Incendiaries: The Town of Tiptonville, Tenn. Wiped Out by Flame,” *Washington (D. C.) Times*, Mar. 21, 1901.

the blaze consumed most of the stores on Main Street along with a number of residences. Damage estimates totaled \$75,000.00 to \$100,000.00.

The white community and press jumped to the conclusion that the fire had been set by vindictive African Americans. Newspapers commented, “it is supposed” that the African American community started the fire “out of revenge for the lynching.”²⁰¹ It seems likely, however, that the white community simply wanted to blame the African American community for the destruction. Subsequent reports downplayed the likelihood that anyone in the black community could have started the fire. The *Tennessean* noted the following in a “Special” report from Union City on March 21, 1901:

The fire, it is learned, originated in the rear of J. R. George’s store, in some unaccountable way, and while some believe it was accidental, others think it was of incendiary origin; but the early hour at which it started makes the latter theory seem improbable.²⁰²

There were in fact only five incidents in which victims appear not to have been taken from custody prior to being lynched. Several of those have previously been mentioned, including Lum Ward, ambushed in 1895 (see pp. 71-72), and the two 1908 lynching incidents involving the Reelfoot Lake Night Riders (discussed in detail, beginning at p. 123). Of the remaining two incidents, one occurred in Obion County and one in Fulton County. In 1887, three African American men, Adam Charles, Andy Miller, and William Smith, were tracked down and lynched by a mob, reportedly including both

²⁰¹ “Burned By Incendiaries, Friends of Ike Fitzgerald Suspected of Setting Fire to Tiptonville,” *Nashville Banner*, Mar. 21, 1901; “Burning of Town Follows the Lynching of a Negro,” *Chicago Tribune*, Mar. 21, 1901.

²⁰² “Tiptonville Fire: Further Details of the Destruction Wrought -- One Death So Far,” *Tennessean*, Mar. 22, 1901.

white and black members, for an alleged sexual assault of a 10-year old girl in Rives, Tennessee. According to the *Memphis Avalanche*, “No accusations were made by the pursuing party, who proceeded in ominous silence to a wood near by, where the three were hanged.” Afterwards, the white community expressed only compassion for the child, and newspapers reported that the African American community was “thoroughly in sympathy with the actions of the avenging party and condemned the assault in unmeasured terms.”²⁰³ There was no expression of outrage by any source that three men, who were never identified, had been murdered by a mob before they could even be charged with a crime or taken into custody.

The other incident, in Fulton County, occurred in 1902 and is singular in its horror. The Paducah *News-Democrat* reported the story as follows:

Bill Dooley, a negro section hand employed by the I. C. railroad, was taken from his home and shot to death here last night. Three men entered his cabin, in the outskirts of Fulton, threw a rope around his neck and dragged him out and fired five bullets into him. It is believed they were looking for a negro who had been guilty of attacking the police, and made a mistake, killing an innocent man.

In contrast to the 1887 lynchings, both the white and black community condemned the murder of Bill Dooley, who was a reputable family man and railroad employee. The Fulton City Council quickly took action and offered a \$200 reward for the conviction of the killers. Newspapers reported that the city was determined “to ferret out the assassins of Dooley,” and expected the governor to offer an additional cash reward for “bringing the guilty ones to justice.” At the same time, the Paducah *News-*

²⁰³ “Judge Lynch Presided,” *Memphis (TN) Avalanche*, Dec. 9, 1887.

Democrat reported that “the negro population is up in arms” and that a “race clash may come at Fulton.” Ever protective of the white community despite the legitimate concerns of the black community, the newspaper adopted a menacing tone: “Good citizens here condemn the lynching, but any outbreak by the negroes would be met by a solid front of the whites.”

In the event, no race war erupted and, within two days’ time, two white police officers were arrested and charged with the murder.²⁰⁴ At the officers’ preliminary hearing, the case against Hardee Beasley was dismissed; however, on the strength of African American eyewitnesses, the charges against R. M. Potts were bound over to the grand jury, and he was subsequently indicted for the murder of Mr. Dooley. The case was continued numerous times and dragged on for two years, but was finally tried to a jury in May 1904. After hearing testimony for two days with “every point being contested,” the jury announced a not guilty verdict within 30 minutes of receiving the case. During that 30 minutes, the jury voted twice: the first time 11-1, with one vote for conviction; the second time unanimously for acquittal.²⁰⁵ This was the closest any member of a lynch mob ever came to being convicted of an African American lynching-related crime in the Tri-Counties region.

Sheriffs and police chiefs, particularly after the turn of the century, did take measures to protect potential lynch victims. There was at least one incident in which law

²⁰⁴“Innocent Negro Brutally Murdered By Three Unknown Men at Fulton,” *News-Democrat*, Feb. 15, 1902; uncaptioned news item, *Courier-Journal*, Feb. 16, 1902; “Both Protest,” *News-Democrat*, Feb. 19, 1902.

²⁰⁵ “Who Killed Bill Dooley?,” *Hickman Courier*, Feb. 28, 1902; “R. M. Potts Acquitted,” *Hickman Courier*, May 6, 1904.

enforcement successfully prevented a lynching and carried out a legal execution instead. In December 1889, a black man named Lev James was accused of murdering a white Illinois Central brakeman named James Garner. James was captured in Arkansas weeks after the murder and was being returned to Fulton by train when the Fulton city marshall learned that a mob was waiting for them at the station. He contacted a deputy traveling with James and directed him to take James off the train and deliver him to a house in the countryside where James was held until the mob disbursed. James was eventually convicted and scheduled to be hanged on November 21, 1890. In yet another unusual twist, the sheriff informed the governor that he believed James to be insane and, following a sanity hearing, a jury indeed found James to be insane. His execution was put on hold in December 1890, pending James's "recovery of his senses."²⁰⁶ Apparently, he did recover, and on June 10, 1891, he was hanged in Fulton. It was the first legal execution in Fulton County since before the Civil War, and the *Courier-Journal* ran a front page story about it which even included a line drawing of Lev James.²⁰⁷

There were other "near misses." In June 1906, a black porter at the Palace Hotel in Union City was arrested for attempting to assault Beulah Morrow, a young woman who was staying in the hotel. The accused, Albert Scaggs, "was given counsel, who, after conferring with the Attorney General, thought it advisable for the negro to plead guilty, which he did." It speaks well of the lawyers that they negotiated a sentence of 10 years for the attempted assault, and the judge accepted it, but they seemed to realize that

²⁰⁶ "No Hanging, Lev James' Sentence Suspended," *Hickman Courier*, Nov. 7, 1890.

²⁰⁷ "Death Penalty, Lev James Hanged For An Unprovoked Murder At Hickman," *Courier-Journal*, June 11, 1891.

the sentence might not satisfy everyone in the community. The *Commercial Courier* noted, “Deputy Sheriff Enloe Chiles hustled Scaggs off . . . in a buggy at double quick time as soon as the sentence had been fixed,” and added: “When a negro lays hands on a white woman it means ‘suicide,’ and Scaggs escaped . . . with his life and that was all.”²⁰⁸

In another incident in 1908, a black man named German Adkisson, supposedly “crazed from the effects of cocaine,” proceeded “to curse out the white population of the city, using the vilest kind of oaths.” When the deputy sheriff asked him to stop, “a fight ensued,” and a crowd of 100 men and boys gathered to watch. “Mob spirit was rampant for a few minutes. The timely arrival of Sheriff Seat is all that saved his neck. Even then, the negro’s head was used for a punching-bag, pins thrust into his body and the like before his protectors could land him behind the bars.” He was held in jail for a few days, then fined \$25 for being drunk and disorderly, and released apparently without incident.²⁰⁹

²⁰⁸ “Attempted Criminal Assault,” *Commercial Courier*, May 25, 1906. A similar situation had developed two years earlier in Jackson, Tennessee. A “negro brute” named John Haynes, who had confessed to attempted rape, was moved to four different jails, including Union City, in order to keep him from being lynched prior to trial. The Madison County sheriff was able to keep Haynes safe until he could be sentenced to 21 years in the penitentiary. The Jackson newspaper reported, “The sheriff got through all right.” “Back From Nashville,” *Jackson (TN) Daily Sun*, Mar. 24, 1904.

²⁰⁹ “Lynching Narrowly Averted,” *Hickman Courier*, Sept. 24, 1908. Adkisson may have been spared because, as the article noted, he was an employee of S. L. Dodds a successful and well-regarded planter in the bottoms below Hickman, who was protective of his workers. See 1910 incident involving Dodds at p. 53.

A Lynching Unlike The Rest

There is one lynching incident which stands out among all the others for its senselessness and shocking brutality. It is the only lynching incident among the 51 African American lynchings in the Tri-Counties which was even arguably for a social infraction as opposed to an alleged crime, and it is the only one to have involved a woman and children. It was accomplished by a gang of whitecaps who had no personal interest in the underlying social infraction, and seems to have been carried out only because the gang had nothing better to do on the night it occurred -- three months after the infraction had been adjudicated in the local court of law. It is also the most widely cited and most entirely misunderstood of the lynchings which took place in the Tri-Counties.

Just before midnight on Saturday, October 3, 1908, a group of 30-50 masked white men calling themselves Night Riders rode into the small community of Brownsville located 3 1/2 miles south of Hickman, Kentucky. They left their horses at the farm of a man named Joe Williams and went on foot to the home of David and Annie Walker, an African American couple living on their 2 1/2 acre farm nearby. When the riders arrived at the Walker home, they called David Walker to come out and take a whipping, but he refused to comply. They then set fire to the house, and the masked men shot the couple and four of their children as they attempted to escape. Mr. Walker was killed instantly. Mrs. Walker, clutching an infant in her arms, was shot in the abdomen as she fled the house, though she lived long enough to give testimony at the coroner's inquest. The infant was also struck by a bullet and died, still cradled by his mother as she collapsed on

the ground. Other children were similarly wounded by gunfire, and one young daughter died immediately. The family lay where they fell throughout the night and well into the following day before people in the community came to assist those still living and to remove the bodies of the dead.

Lynchings were so common during that era that they were often of only passing interest, but, in this instance, the press carried the story as headline news in hundreds of newspapers across the country ranging from the *New York Times* to the *Los Angeles Times*. Most of the large regional newspapers in Kentucky and Tennessee provided extensive coverage as well.²¹⁰ Reporters and their editors seemed genuinely shocked by the brutality of the attack. Headlines ranged from “FIENDS WIPE OUT FAMILY. . . UNHEARD-OF ATROCITY” to “MOB SLAUGHTERS FAMILY.” One headline in particular captured the horror of the night: “KENTUCKY WEEP! For Your Children of Hell Have Broken Loose Again.”²¹¹ The editorial board of the *Louisville Courier-Journal* even went so far as to compare the Night Riders unfavorably to Apaches. In the editors’ words, “Not in the bloodiest days of border warfare between the aborigines and white settlers was a more ghastly outrage committed.”²¹²

²¹⁰ “Night Riders Kill Three,” *New York Times*, Oct. 5, 1908; “Mob Madness, Night Riders Slay Family,” *Los Angeles (CA) Times*, Oct. 5, 1908; “Massacre for Negro Family,” *Courier-Journal*, Oct. 5, 1908; “Seven Are Shot by Angry Mob,” *Tennessean*, Oct. 5, 1908.

²¹¹ “Fiends Wipe Out Family . . . Unheard-Of Atrocity,” *Hopkinsville (KY) Kentuckian*, Oct. 8, 1908; “Mob Slaughters Family,” *Valentine (NE) Democrat*, Oct. 8, 1908; “Kentucky Weep! For Your Children of Hell Have Broken Loose Again,” *Public Ledger* (Maysville, KY), Oct. 6, 1908.

²¹² “Worse Than the Apaches,” *Courier-Journal*, Oct. 6, 1908.

Even so, the press did little to investigate the circumstances surrounding the murders.²¹³ None of the facts in any of the newspaper accounts were attributed to specific sources, and the reporters seem to have accepted the first explanation offered as to why the Walkers were targeted. According to the newspapers, the simple answer to the “why” question was that David Walker had “cursed a white woman and drawn a gun upon a white man.”²¹⁴ That explanation does contain elements of the truth. David Walker had indeed been accused by his neighbor Joe Williams of using abusive language toward Williams’s wife and of drawing a gun on him. But, as will be discussed below, the matter had been resolved four months prior to the murders, and, even in the Jim Crow South, abusive language provided scant justification for killing an innocent wife and children. The local *Hickman Courier*, published on Thursdays and therefore five days late to the story, seems to have recognized the need for further justification and declared, without substantiation, “Walker was a bad negro” who “in other instances” had been charged with being “brazen and impudent.”²¹⁵ The paper continued to heap abuse on the Walkers the following week by printing, again without attribution, that “Walker was no

²¹³ Indeed, no one even bothered to learn the first name of Mrs. Walker, who has consistently, without exception, been referred to in every newspaper and historical account as “Dave Walker’s wife.” U. S. Census records for 1900 reveal her first name to have been Annie. See <https://www.censusrecords.com/record?id=usc%2f1900%2f004118909%2f00613%2f029>, accessed July 10, 2019.

²¹⁴ “Night Riders Kill Three,” *New York Times*, Oct. 5, 1908.

²¹⁵ “Night Riders Wipe Out Negro Family—4 Dead, 4 Wounded,” *Hickman Courier*, Oct. 8, 1908.

saint, neither his wife and 18-year-old girl, all of whom are said to have insulted a white lady with the most rank profanity.”²¹⁶

The Paducah *News-Democrat*, the nearest daily paper, said the opposite. According to that paper’s local (but unnamed) sources, Walker had never been in any serious trouble, and “the outrage has caused the greatest indignation in this [the Hickman] part of [Fulton] county.”²¹⁷ Consistent with the Paducah paper’s account, there is no record to indicate that David Walker or any member of his family had ever been arrested or sued civilly by anyone in Fulton County or the surrounding area apart from the singular incident involving Joe Williams. Nevertheless, press reports suggest no further investigation into who David Walker was or why the Night Riders targeted him.

Modern day accounts of the Walker family murders appear to accept the newspaper reports of the day and effectively end the story here.²¹⁸ Both local histories and more scholarly accounts uniformly conclude that nothing was ever done to bring the murderers to justice, and “[n]o charges were ever filed for this atrocity.”²¹⁹ There is, however, a great deal more to the story.

²¹⁶ “Local Notes on the ‘Night Rider’ Situation,” *Hickman Courier*, Oct. 15, 1908.

²¹⁷ “Fire and Shot for Negroes,” *News-Democrat* (Paducah, KY), Oct. 6, 1908.

²¹⁸ Current day lists of lynching victims consistently cite the reason for David Walker’s lynching as swearing at or cursing a white woman. See, e.g., Wright, *Racial Violence in Kentucky*, App. A, 321; Tolnay and Beck, *A Festival of Violence*, 54, fn. 35.

²¹⁹ Wright, *Racial Violence in Kentucky*, 124; Paul J. Vanderwood, *Night Riders of Reelfoot Lake* (Memphis: Memphis State University Press, 1969), 41; Hayes, *Historic Reelfoot Lake Region*, 318.

At the time of the murders, the Walkers were, in fact, a well-established family who had lived in Fulton County, Kentucky, for 30 years. David Walker's father, Edward, called "Ned," had moved across the Tennessee state line from Obion County to Fulton County, and bought a 25-acre farm from a white man named A. J. Whipple in March 1878, when David, known as "Dave," was 12 years old.²²⁰ In 1892, when Dave was 26, he bought 2 1/2 acres from one of his father's white neighbors, and, by the time of his death in 1908, he had become a reasonably successful farmer by the standards of the day.²²¹ According to court records filed after his death, Dave Walker's personal property included 40 barrels of corn and 2500 pounds of cotton in the field, along with 23 pigs, six cows, three mules, three horses, two wagons, two buggies, three saddles, three plows, and assorted other farm implements.²²²

The neighbor from whom Dave purchased the farm was T. P. Williams, who owned and lived on a quarter section of land that adjoined Ned's property.²²³ One of Williams's sons was Joe Williams, who eventually had his own farm on a portion of his

²²⁰ Recorded in Fulton County Deed Book 11, Page 350 (all Fulton County records cited herein are located at the Fulton County Clerk Office, Hickman, KY); 1880 U. S. Census Records at <https://www.censusrecords.com/record?id=usc%2f1880%2f005160675%2f00599&parentid=usc%2f1880%2f1000120725862>, accessed Aug. 5, 2019.

²²¹ Recorded in Fulton County Deed Book 17, Page 261.

²²² See Appraise Bill, Fulton County Court Order Book #8, Page 628, filed on behalf of Dave Walker's Estate. According to the estate appraisal, the only household goods to have survived the fire were a bell, a kettle, and a tub.

²²³ A section consists of 640 acres, or one square mile. See <https://www.sos.ky.gov/admin/land/non-military/jacksonpurchase/Pages/Mapping-the-Jackson-Purchase.aspx>, accessed May 20, 2020.

father's quarter section. Dave and Joe would have known each other since childhood, and they lived as neighboring farmers for 16 years before there was any record of significant trouble between them.²²⁴

On June 5, 1908, four months before the murders, the *Hickman Courier* carried a short news item which read:

Dave Walker was fined \$10 and cost Wednesday by County Judge Naylor for using abusive language. The warrant for his arrest was sworn to by Joe Williams and wife. Walker was also charged with flourishing a deadly weapon, but the evidence on this charge was not sufficient to convict.²²⁵

This brief account carried no suggestion of a racial transgression and was so insignificant that it was sandwiched between two equally mundane stories — one about a euchre party and the other about a house under construction that had blown down in a storm. Walker was not even identified in the story as a Negro, which would have been standard practice for newspapers in 1908. A private investigator later told the *Louisville Courier-Journal* that the trouble was over Joe Williams's cattle, which had broken into one of Walker's fields. According to the investigator, Dave Walker went to Joe's house to speak to him about it, and when Joe's wife came to the door and said her husband was not at home, Dave "impugned her veracity."²²⁶

²²⁴ Williams Plat recorded in Fulton County Process'ers & Comm'ers Rpts., Book 2, Page 146.

²²⁵ Uncaptioned news item, *Hickman Courier*, June 5, 1908.

²²⁶ Warden Hale, "Detective Who Worked on Cases Tells of Attacks on Negroes in the Western Part of the State," *Courier-Journal*, Dec. 13, 1908.

Assuming that story is true, the incident was essentially a spat between two neighbors, and Joe Williams responded by doing what he might have done with any white man: he took the matter to the courthouse and let the judge decide. At the time, the penalty in Kentucky for using abusive language was a fine up to \$50, and the penalty for the crime of flourishing a deadly weapon was a fine between \$50 and \$100, as well as a potential 10-15 day jail sentence.²²⁷ As though to emphasize how trivial the dispute was, the judge simply fined Walker \$10 for using abusive language and found him not guilty of the weapon charge.²²⁸ That was the end of the matter until four months later when the Night Riders decided to give Dave Walker a whipping — a whipping in which Joe Williams, tellingly, refused to participate.²²⁹

By October 1908, Night Riders had been active in both western Kentucky and northwest Tennessee for many months, albeit for different reasons. The Night Riders of western Kentucky were part of what historians have labelled “the Black Patch War.” Briefly, in 1901, tobacco farmers in Middle Tennessee and western Kentucky formed the Dark Tobacco District Planters’ Protective Association and began an effort of organized resistance against price-setting in the dark-fired tobacco industry led by the American

²²⁷ Ky. Stat. §1271, §1308 (1899).

²²⁸ A local account of the story, reported only at the time of the murders four months later, included the following: “According to the story that reached here. . . Walker is charged with telling bystanders after the trial that he was fixed for them.” This appears to have been yet another attempt to bolster justification for the Night Riders’ raid, since the claim did not surface until after the murders and there was no specific source for the information — only “according to the story that reached here.” See “Negro Family Massacred at Hickman by Masked Men Sunday Morning Because They Resist Visitation,” *Paducah (KY) Sun*, Oct. 5, 1908.

²²⁹ “Night Riders Wipe Out Negro Family,” *Hickman Courier*, Oct. 8, 1908.

Tobacco Company. When legal and legislative action failed, the Planters' Protective Association turned to vigilantism, and, beginning in early 1906, masked men calling themselves Night Riders began to burn tobacco warehouses and to intimidate farmers unwilling to join the Association. By the spring of 1908, the Night Riders had established themselves in western Kentucky not only as the soldiers of the tobacco wars but as the enforcers of homogeneity and normative behavior in the region.²³⁰ Enforcement efforts included racially-motivated crimes designed to rid local communities of African American farmers and laborers who competed with whites in the tobacco markets and in the job market in general.²³¹

The tactics of the Black Patch Night Riders appealed to farmers throughout the lower Mississippi Valley, and in particular to cotton farmers in Arkansas, Missouri, Tennessee, Mississippi, and Louisiana who were suffering a similar plight in their dealings with cotton merchants. Cotton farmers began calling themselves Night Riders and set about burning cotton gins and warehouses and terrorizing cotton merchants.²³²

²³⁰ See generally Christopher Waldrep, *Night Riders: Defending Community in the Black Patch, 1890-1915* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 1993).

²³¹ See generally Suzanne Marshall, *Violence in the Black Patch of Kentucky and Tennessee* (Columbia, MO: University of Missouri Press, 1994); Eliot Jaspín, "'Don't Kill Us All,'" *Buried in the Bitter Waters: The Hidden History of Racial Cleansing in America* (New York: Basic Books, 2007), 87-107.

²³² See "The Night Rider in the Cotton Patch," *Owensboro (KY) Messenger-Inquirer*, Sept. 18, 1908; "Cotton Prices Must Go Higher: Remedy for Night Riding," *Tennessean*, Oct. 22, 1908; "Discussing Night Riders: President of the Ginners Urges Repeal Anti-Futures Laws As a Remedy," *Natchez (MS) Democrat*, Nov. 12, 1908.

Indeed, newspapers from the period leave the impression that wholesale anarchy broke out across the lower Mississippi Valley.²³³

Nowhere was this more true than in the vicinity around Reelfoot Lake in the northwestern corner of Tennessee. Formed by an earthquake along the New Madrid fault line which caused the Mississippi River to flood in 1811-1812, Reelfoot Lake runs roughly parallel to the Mississippi River for approximately 14 miles and ends less than 5 miles from the Kentucky state line. The western shore of the shallow lake runs the length of Obion County, and the eastern shore lies in neighboring Lake County. Both counties sit on the Tennessee-Kentucky border.²³⁴

The Night Riders in the Reelfoot region were neither tobacco nor cotton farmers, but were instead commercial fishermen and subsistence farmers who lived on or near the shore of the lake. The lake had been used for hunting and fishing and as a source of income for many local people trying to eke out a living since settlement of the area began in the 1820s. Public use of the lake was not a concern until a man named James C. Harris began acquiring title to large quantities of lake property in the latter part of the 19th century. When Harris announced in August 1899 that he owned the lake and intended to drain it in order to grow cotton, the community took legal action.²³⁵ A lengthy court battle followed, which concluded only after the Tennessee Supreme Court ruled that,

²³³ See, e.g., “Near Riot in Convention: Attack Upon and Defense of Night Riders at Memphis Cotton Conference Puts House in Uproar, with Members Standing on Chairs Shouting,” *Arkansas Democrat* (Little Rock, AR), Nov. 12, 1908.

²³⁴ For extensive discussion of the lake’s creation, see Hayes, *Historic Reelfoot Lake Region*, 18-29.

²³⁵ Vanderwood, *Night Riders*, 8-10.

because the shallow, narrow lake was not navigable, it was not a public body of water and was therefore subject to private ownership.²³⁶

Reelfoot Lake now belonged legally to the Harris family. James C. Harris died in 1903 and his plan to drain the lake was never carried out, but he left the property to his son, who nonetheless asserted his ownership rights by enjoining anyone from using the lake without his permission. More litigation followed between Harris and a few property owners whose rights to certain shoreline property remained in dispute. The matter concluded only with the creation of a corporation which brought together as shareholders all parties to the litigation along with a few investors including, notably, some of the parties' attorneys. The new corporation, formed on July 31, 1907, and called the West Tennessee Land Company, then leased exclusive fishing and game rights to an entity known as the Reelfoot Lake Fish Company formed by the local dock owners who had previously opposed Harris.²³⁷ Betrayed by their leaders who had formerly opposed private ownership and deprived of their ability to use the lake, local fishermen and hunters resorted to violence.

According to local historian David G. Hayes, in the spring of 1908, several men from Reelfoot Lake visited Calloway County, Kentucky, where Black Patch Night Riders were known to be active. Soon after that visit, the Reelfoot Lake Night Riders began to make their presence felt in the lake region.²³⁸ Originally organized to thwart anyone who

²³⁶ Vanderwood, *Night Riders*, 11, citing *Webster v. Harris*, 69 S.W. 782 (Tenn. 1903).

²³⁷ Vanderwood, *Night Riders*, 12-14.

²³⁸ Hayes, *Historic Reelfoot Lake Region*, 313; Vanderwood, *Night Riders*, 24.

cooperated with either the West Tennessee Land Company or the Reelfoot Lake Fish Company, the Night Riders soon attracted young thrill seekers looking for a way to “escape boredom.” The rank and file were young farm hands, day laborers, and “local riffraff,” led by a few small farm owners and commercial fishermen from both sides of the state line.²³⁹ They divided themselves geographically into two gangs in order to patrol each end of the lake, and, like the Black Patch Night Riders, relied upon a manifesto and an oath given on penalty of death, as well as disguises, secret signals, and passwords in order to give the group some semblance of structure.²⁴⁰ Over the next seven months, the Night Riders wreaked havoc around the lake, beginning with the destruction of the fish dock, storehouses, and barns of the Reelfoot Lake Fish Company on April 11, 1908, and ending on October 20, 1908, with the murder of Quentin Rankin, one of the lawyers who had represented the dock owners and later become a shareholder in the West Tennessee Land Company.²⁴¹

In the months between the destruction of the Reelfoot Lake Fish Company’s property and the death of Rankin, the Night Riders turned to the enforcement of their own social code. Their preferred method of punishment was horsewhippings, and, in most instances, their targets were people alleged to have caused some affront to one or more members of the gang. Between the months of April and October 1908, they carried out

²³⁹ Vanderwood, *Night Riders*, 22-23. According to reports at the time, at least twelve Night Riders were from the Brownsville community in Kentucky, and “were particularly active in the raid on the Walkers.” See “Bail for Men in Local Jail,” *Tennessean*, Nov. 12, 1908.

²⁴⁰ Vanderwood, *Night Riders*, 24-26; Hayes, *Historic Reelfoot Lake Region*, 313-14.

²⁴¹ Vanderwood, *Night Riders*, 12, 35; Vandiver, *Lethal Punishment*, 111.

approximately 100 acts of violence — most of which were whippings of white men and women throughout Obion County, Tennessee. One woman was whipped on two separate occasions because she refused to withdraw her suit for divorce against one of the Riders. Another woman was whipped because “she talked too much,” and yet a third woman was whipped because she refused to live with her habitually drunken husband. One man was whipped for openly expressing disdain for the Night Riders; other men were whipped for refusing to join or cooperate with them.²⁴²

Within this scheme of member-driven retribution, the targeting of Dave Walker appears to have been unique for several reasons. First, African-Americans had not been a target of the Reelfoot Lake Night Riders in the months prior to the attack. In fact, nowhere in the oral histories or newspaper accounts covering the Night Riders is there any mention of the Riders ever attacking any black landowner other than Walker.²⁴³ Second, the Night Riders had no personal grudge against Walker. The fact that they stopped at Joe Williams’s house on the night they went to the Walker farm and pointedly

²⁴² Vanderwood, *Night Riders*, 26-27; Hayes, *Historic Reelfoot Lake Region*, 316-17, 328.

²⁴³ In fact, the only reference to African-Americans in the Night Riders’ manifesto was a notice stating, “No man shall be allowed to employ Negro labor in the lake district after Jan. 1, 1909.” Hayes, *Historic Reelfoot Lake Region*, 316. There was only one other reported attack on a black man by presumed Night Riders. In an article reporting several attacks and threatened attacks on well-known white members of the immediate area around Reelfoot Lake, the *Nashville Banner* stated that a black man, named King Farrington, had been stopped and questioned by men he did not recognize on the night of October 7, 1908, immediately after the Walkers’ lynchings. According to the article, he “was used very badly being knocked and cuffed about for some time.” As he was leaving, one of the men shot him in the right arm and told him not to be caught after dark in the lake district again. The paper said, “It is feared that the Night Riders are commencing a campaign to intimidate the cotton pickers of that district, the district being only about two miles from where it is known that a great number of ‘riders’ live.” “Used A Rifle As Persuader,” *Nashville Banner*, Oct. 8, 1908.

asked him to go with them suggests that, even when an African-American was involved, their code of conduct compelled them to justify their actions. Joe Williams, however, was not a known Night Rider, and he refused to participate in the raid. The Night Riders implicated him anyway by forcing him to hold their horses while they walked the rest of the way to Walker's house.²⁴⁴

Third, Night Rider actions typically followed immediately upon the heels of an affront to one of the members. Why then did the Night Riders choose the night of October 3 — four months after the Fulton County Court had disposed of Joe Williams's complaint against Dave Walker — to administer the whipping? Events of the day provide a probable answer. On the afternoon of October 3, an Obion County jury had deadlocked at the conclusion of a trial against several Night Riders who had been charged with whipping a white man named J. W. Rook.²⁴⁵ It was the first time any Reelfoot Lake Night Rider had been put on trial for "whitecapping," and the resulting mistrial meant the Night Riders had effectively won.²⁴⁶ The *Hickman Courier* later claimed that Hickman was filled with "fire-water" and drunken men that night.²⁴⁷ It seems likely that Night

²⁴⁴ "Fire And Shot For Negroes," *News-Democrat*, Oct. 6, 1908.

²⁴⁵ "Verdict in the Night Rider Case," *Clarksville (TN) Leaf-Chronicle*, Oct. 6, 1908; "Night Rider Trial Over," *Hickman Courier*, Oct. 8, 1908. In fact, the two stories appeared under a collective headline in one local paper. See "Fire and Shot For Negroes," and "Night Rider Trial Over," *News-Democrat*, Oct 6, 1908.

²⁴⁶ Whitecapping was a term used to describe the unlawful infliction of corporal punishment. It derived from a group calling themselves White Caps, which appears to have originated in Indiana in the 1880s. White Caps claimed to enforce extrajudicial moral codes. See Philip Dray, *At the Hands of Persons Unknown: The Lynching of Black America* (New York: Modern Library, 2002), 143.

²⁴⁷ "Lid Was Off Saturday," *Hickman Courier*, Oct. 8, 1908.

Riders from the surrounding area decided to celebrate their invincibility by riding to Dave Walker's farm outside Hickman essentially on a pretext with nothing more than a plan to whip Walker as they had J. W. Rook. Warden Hale, a private investigator writing an exposé about the Night Riders for the *Louisville Courier-Journal* in December 1908, suggested as much: "Taking license from the failure of the people of that section to convict . . . [they] marched forth in October . . . and four negroes living near Hickman were shot down in their tracks as they emerged from a burning cabin."²⁴⁸

Hale's description clearly connected the not guilty verdict in Obion County with the attack on the Walkers in Fulton County, but it should not be read to suggest that the Night Riders went to the Walker farm with the specific intention of setting fire to the house and murdering the family. Arson and murder were the outcome, but the Night Riders were known to be horsewhippers, not cold-blooded killers. All the newspaper reports of the day in fact state that the Riders' "original intention" was to horsewhip Walker, and none of the evidence suggests otherwise.²⁴⁹

The Night Riders, however, underestimated Dave Walker, and the situation quickly spun out of control. From their earliest raids in April until the night of October 3, the Night Riders had met with little resistance, and, in the drunken headiness of their

²⁴⁸ Warden Hale, "Detective Who Worked on Cases," *Louisville Courier-Journal*, Dec. 13, 1908. Similar speculation had been offered by the *Nashville Banner* in an article published on October 21, 1908, about the Rankin murder. According to the *Banner*, "Some believe that the recent trial here of a Night Rider case [*State v. Rafe James*] added fuel to the Night Rider flames." See "R. Z. Taylor Escapes Death At Hands Of Night Riders," *Nashville Banner*, Oct. 21, 1908.

²⁴⁹ "Night Riders Kill Three," *New York Times*, Oct. 5, 1908; "Massacre for Negro Family," *Courier-Journal*, Oct. 5, 1908.

court victory, they would not have anticipated resistance that night. But Dave Walker was not like their other victims. Dave Walker, a black man, must have anticipated the worst when he saw Night Riders approaching his home on a Saturday at midnight. Without knowing their intention to horsewhip him, he would reasonably have assumed that, not only was he vulnerable, but so was his entire family. When the Riders called him out, Walker stayed where he was rather than face them in the open; and, when he did not obey their command, the Riders reacted to his defiance by grabbing cans of coal oil and torching the house. In the ensuing chaos, they shot at not only Walker but every person trying to escape the flames. The *Paducah Sun* captured the truth of the moment in its first headline about the story: “Negro Family Massacred at Hickman . . . *Because They Resist Visitation.*”²⁵⁰

At the time, some newspaper accounts claimed that Dave Walker had fired on the Night Riders first, when they initially ordered him to come out of the house. Other papers tell the story differently, and at least one local paper stated that Walker fired on them only after they actually entered the house. According to the *Paducah Sun*, “when he refused to admit them and when they burst in the doors he opened fire with a shotgun and his two boys with revolvers.”²⁵¹

The clearest and, likely, most accurate account of what occurred came from Mrs. Walker herself. Annie Walker, miraculously, lived long enough to testify at an inquest early in the week following the attack. Mrs. Walker’s statement clarified the actions of

²⁵⁰ “Negro Family Massacred at Hickman,” *Paducah Sun*, Oct. 5, 1908 (emphasis added).

²⁵¹ See, e.g., “Seven Are Shot by Angry Mob,” *Tennessean*, Oct. 5, 1908; “Negro Family Massacred at Hickman by Masked Men Sunday Morning,” *Paducah Sun*, Oct. 5, 1908.

both her husband and the Night Riders, and vividly described the horrific scene that followed. As reported by the Louisville *Courier-Journal*:

. . . Walker's wife said her husband made no fight, but refused to come out when commanded by the night riders, and that the night riders broke in the door, poured coal oil on the beds, fired them as the family retreated back to the kitchen and jumped out of the doors and windows when the night riders shot them.²⁵²

What could have prompted such an uncharacteristically vicious, sadistic response? Up until the moment when Dave Walker refused to go out to meet them, the Night Riders' actions had been consistent with every other whipping incident in which they had been involved. The turning point must have been Dave Walker's refusal to submit. For a group of white farm hands and day laborers, there may well have been two triggers for the violence that followed: (1) Walker's defiance, and (2) his land ownership.²⁵³ Viewed in combination, defiance from even modestly successful black farmer would have been seen as an intolerable aggression, and it led inexorably to a furious and disproportionate reaction. John Dollard identified this very kind of behavior in his now-classic text, *Caste and Class in a Southern Town*.²⁵⁴ Dollard observed that Southern whites often resorted to direct force in order to maintain their social position

²⁵² "Walker Family Left In Serious Condition," *Courier-Journal*, Oct. 7, 1908.

²⁵³ In addition to being a farm owner, according to the 1900 U. S. Census, Dave and Annie Walker were literate, which would also have distinguished them from many white laborers. See <https://www.censusrecords.com/record?id=usc%2f1900%2f004118909%2f00613%2f029>, accessed July 10, 2019. For an analysis of the factors that put African American men at risk for lynching, see generally Bailey and Tolnay, *Lynched*.

²⁵⁴ John Dollard, *Caste and Class in a Southern Town* (Hartford: Yale University Press, 1937), 320.

vis-à-vis blacks. According to Dollard, the “formula” for direct force was “a counter attack delivered *in advance of* the attack” by blacks.²⁵⁵ The counter attack in this case included not only Walker but his entire family, who, in the heat of the moment, would have been seen as complicit in Walker’s aggression.

In the aftermath of the night’s violence, many of the Night Riders themselves seemed surprised and caught off guard by what had happened. Realizing they had crossed a line, even in the eyes of the white community, two of them later claimed they had tried to stop it.²⁵⁶ A third went so far as to suggest that the Walker murders were a turning point for many in the group. According to Paul J. Vanderwood:

The Night Riders themselves were nauseated by the wanton murder of the Walkers. They had not intended to go that far with the blacks, and some of the members of the group began to question the future of the clan. External support for the movement also started to wane, a serious threat to an organization which nourished itself on local sympathy and sought widespread public approval.²⁵⁷

Joe Williams, who set these events in motion by taking Dave Walker to court, may also have felt remorse, even though his only role in the attack was to hold the Night Riders’ horses. In a peculiar twist of fate, Joe Williams died of pneumonia on November 15, 1908, less than six weeks after the deaths of the Walker family. According to the local newspaper, he had been sick “only a short time and his death was unexpected.”

²⁵⁵ Dollard, *Caste and Class*, 322-23 (emphasis added).

²⁵⁶ “Marshall on Stand,” *New Orleans (LA) Times-Democrat*, Jan. 26, 1909.

²⁵⁷ Vanderwood, *Night Riders*, 41-42, citing a 1962 interview with Fred Pinion, one of the Night Riders tried for the murder of Quentin Rankin.

He was 37 years old. The paper noted, “Mr. Williams is the gentleman who was given so much notoriety [*sic*] on account of having been forced by Night Riders to hold their horses while they killed the Walker negroes a few weeks ago.” It is tempting to believe that Joe Williams may have felt responsible for his neighbors’ deaths. Indeed, the incident seems to have marked the entire Williams family, because Joe’s wife Prudence died at the age of 34, a mere three years later. She left behind a letter to her family which read in part, “The dear Lord say ‘Blessed are they that suffer persecutions.’ I have been one that has suffered them. I have had my heart pierced with many thorns since your father was laid to rest.”²⁵⁸

Even though the remorse expressed by some of the Night Riders and within the community seems genuine, an alternative narrative has found its way into the story in recent years. In the alternate narrative, the Walkers were murdered in order to steal Dave Walker’s land; or, at a minimum, the county took advantage of Walker’s death to “unfairly strip” his heirs of their rightful inheritance.²⁵⁹ Fulton County records prove otherwise. Probate documents located in the County Clerk’s office clearly show that the estate of David Walker was handled properly through the probate court of Fulton County. On October 15, 1908, Fulton County Court Judge W. A. Naylor (the same judge who fined Dave Walker for using abusive language, and who would himself be murdered in September 1918 in a shoot-out with locals) appointed J.P. Leggate, to administer the

²⁵⁸ “Prominent Farmer Dies,” *Hickman Courier*, Nov. 19, 1908; “Death Near Brownsville,” *Hickman Courier*, Oct. 19, 1911.

²⁵⁹ Todd Lewan and Dolores Barclay, Associated Press, “‘When They Steal Your Land, They Steal Your Future,’” *Los Angeles Times*, Dec. 2, 2001.

estate. Leggate appears to have followed all the requirements of administration and kept the estate open until 1915, when Willie Walker, the youngest of the three surviving children, reached the age of majority.²⁶⁰ As of 1914, the assessed value of Walker's 2 1/2 acres was \$50.00, with taxes and costs due of \$3.23.²⁶¹ At that time, the three heirs were being represented by an attorney from the neighboring town of Fulton, Kentucky, and proceeds were due to them in the amount of \$55.53. Despite having sufficient funds remaining in the estate in 1915 to keep the farm, the children appear to have chosen not to pay the taxes or even to buy the land at the tax sale, as heirs often did at the time to ensure good title.²⁶² Instead, the estate was closed on October 11, 1915, without the 1914 property taxes having been paid. According to the settlement statement prepared by J. P. Leggate, he had paid the following bills on behalf of the estate: all real estate taxes prior to 1914; costs associated with sale of the personal property; livestock upkeep; doctors' fees for attending to the Walkers; burial costs, including coffins and grave repairs; and attorney's and commissioner's fees. The court approved the settlement statement, and the

²⁶⁰ Appointment recorded in Fulton County Court Order Book 8, Page 333; Settlement Statement recorded in Fulton County Probate Settlement Book 4, Page 112. Based on their ages as reported in U.S. census records for the year 1900, twins Culah (alternately spelled "Cular") and Beulah Walker would have been 25 years old and Willie would have been 21 in 1915. See <https://www.censusrecords.com/record?id=usc%2f1900%2f004118909%2f00613%2f029>, accessed July 10, 2019. The age of majority is significant because each of the surviving children would have had a homestead exemption on the property until they reached majority at the age of 21. Because of the homestead exemption, the sheriff could not have sold the property prior to 1915 without creating a cloud on the property.

²⁶¹ "Sheriff's Tax Sale," *Hickman Courier*, Feb. 11, 18, 25, Mar. 4, 1915.

²⁶² In fact, in at least one deed reference from 1914, the Walker farm is referred to as belonging to Willie Walker. See Fulton County Deed Book 31, Page 111.

balance remaining of \$55.53 was paid into the court for distribution to the heirs. Written in the margin of Fulton County Probate Settlement Book 4, at page 112, is the following:

Rec'd of E. J. Stahr, Judge, the sum of \$55.53 for Willie Walker, Cular Walker, and Beulah Walker, the sole and only heirs of Dave Walker, deceased. Said heirs have filed affidavits this day showing they are the heirs of Dave Walker and are of full age.
Hershel Smith, attorney.

Sheriff Bailey Huddleston sold the farm for back taxes in 1916. The actual deed from the sheriff, Bailey Huddleston, to J. L. Dotson as purchaser of the property has not been located due to an incomplete recording in 1916; however, the subsequent sale from Dotson to Leonard Harding may be found in the Fulton County Deed Books. The deed to Harding contains the original property description as stated in David Walker's own deed when the property was conveyed to him by T. P. Williams. The deed to Harding further states:

This being the same property conveyed to J. L. Dotson by deed dated in the year of 1916, from Bailey Huddleston, Sheriff of Fulton County, and recorded in Book [...] *and sold for taxes, page 222. This being a tax title from Huddleston to Dotson and from Dotson to Harding.*²⁶³

There is no indication in the records or newspaper accounts that David Walker's estate was mishandled in any way. Indeed, all evidence is to the contrary. Ned Walker's position as a local landowner and member of the community appears to have been unchanged by his son's murder.²⁶⁴ The elder Walker continued to live on his 25-acre

²⁶³ Recorded in Fulton County Deed Book 40, Page 102 (emphasis added).

²⁶⁴ See "Uncle Ned Walker Works in Fulton Though Aged 102," *News-Democrat*, Apr. 28, 1915, in which Dave's father is referred to as "an honest old negro.... highly respected by all the white people of that vicinity."

farm, which adjoined his son's farm along Dave Walker's southern boundary and just down the road from Joe Williams's farm, until 1919.²⁶⁵ Until at least 1914, Dave Walker's youngest surviving child, Willie, lived on the farm with his grandfather.²⁶⁶ In 1919, Ned sold the farm to one of his white neighbors for twice what he originally paid for it, and moved into Hickman to finish out his days living with his niece.²⁶⁷ By then, he was over 100 years old, and had lived on the same farm in the same community in Fulton County for 40 years.

The other misconception that has followed in the wake of the Walker family murders is that no one was ever charged with the murders.²⁶⁸ While that was true for the vast majority of lynchings in the Tri-Counties, it was not true in the case of the Walker family.

On October 7, 1908, Kentucky's Governor Augustus Willson (1907-1911), who was already battling Night Riders throughout the Black Patch, announced that he had ordered a company of militia stationed at Columbus, Kentucky, to go to Hickman to maintain order in the community. He did so, he said, at the request of Fulton County

²⁶⁵ See Fulton County Plat Map for 1890, Section 28, located in Fulton County Clerk Office, Hickman, KY.

²⁶⁶ See 1910 U. S. Census Records at <https://www.censusrecords.com/record?id=usc%2f1910%2f004971590%2f00163&parentid=usc%2f1910%2f004971590%2f00163%2f003>, accessed July 10, 2019.

²⁶⁷ Recorded in Fulton County Deed Book 35, Page 596. See also "Negro Centenarian Dead," *Hickman Courier*, Feb. 23, 1922, which, in providing a brief account of the "night rider trouble," unfortunately confused Ned with Dave.

²⁶⁸ Wright, *Racial Violence in Kentucky*, 124; Hayes, *Historic Reelfoot Lake Region*, 318; Arlene Notoro Morgan, Alice Irene Pifer, and Keith Woods, eds., *The Authentic Voice* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2006), 189.

officials who feared additional attacks from Night Riders.²⁶⁹ He also announced that “every possible effort” would be made “to apprehend” the men who shot the Walkers, and that he expected to use “every arm of the state government, if available,” in order to bring the killers to justice.²⁷⁰

Willson, a lifelong Republican and close personal friend and supporter of U.S. Supreme Court Justice John Marshall Harlan, clearly saw the murders as a blatant act of terrorism.²⁷¹ On October 12, he announced that he was offering a \$500 reward for information leading to the arrest and conviction of any person who participated in the “massacre” of the Walkers. In making the announcement, the governor spoke in impassioned terms about the brutality of the “cowardly fiends” who murdered a man “pleading for mercy,” along with his wife and their young children:

²⁶⁹ “Hickman Asks For Soldiers To Repel Night Rider Attack,” *Paducah Sun*, Oct. 9, 1908; “Governor Orders Troops to Hickman,” *Courier-Journal*, Oct. 9, 1908. Six weeks later, “every business man in the city of Hickman” signed a second request addressed to the governor pleading with him to allow the militia to remain in Hickman. It is clear from the second request that these businessmen did not see the threat as one limited to a surly black farmer. In fact, the request made no reference to race at all, saying only that the Night Riders had murdered an entire family [the Walkers] and asking that the soldiers be allowed to remain in Hickman “until the good citizens think the danger is past.” Filson Historical Society Collection, Augustus Willson Papers, A/W742, Folder 186, Nov. 25, 1908 letter.

²⁷⁰ “Fourth Dies at Hickman — Governor Going After Mob,” *News-Democrat*, Oct. 9, 1908.

²⁷¹ Justice Harlan steadfastly opposed Jim Crow laws throughout his years on the Court and is best remembered as the sole voice of dissent in *Plessy v. Ferguson*, 163 U.S. 537 (1896). See William E. Read and William C. Berman, “Papers of the First Justice Harlan at the University of Louisville,” *American Journal of Legal History*, v. 11, no. 1 (Jan. 1967), 57-68; Alan F. Westin, “John Marshall Harlan and the Constitutional Rights of Negroes: The Transformation of a Southerner,” *Yale Law Journal*, v. 66, no. 5 (Apr. 1957), 637-710.

If two or three men had gone to this poor cabin and murdered the family, the crime would have shocked humanity with its revelation of the incredible wickedness, brutality and dastardly cowardice of the three men. That a larger number, some fifty men, joined in such a crime, multiplies the cowardliness and wickedness fiftyfold, and makes every member of the band guilty of murder in the first degree, of the basest, wickedest, the most cowardly and inhuman murder conceivable to mortal mind.²⁷²

Unfortunately, within days of Governor Willson's announcement, news of another deadly Night Rider attack exploded in northwest Tennessee. On October 18, 1908, just two weeks after the attack on the Walkers, Night Riders murdered Quentin Rankin, investor in the West Tennessee Land Company and one of those responsible for curtailing the Night Riders' fishing rights. Rankin and another investor, Robert Z. Taylor, were kidnapped from their beds and marched to the banks of Reelfoot Lake in Obion County near an area called Walnut Log, just a short distance from the state line. Taylor managed to escape, but Rankin was hanged by a noose dangling from a tree and shot to death less than 10 miles from David Walker's farm.²⁷³

The murder of Quentin Rankin, a former captain in the Spanish American War, set off a massive manhunt in Tennessee, which soon led to the arrest of ninety men alleged to be Night Riders.²⁷⁴ Under pressure from state investigators, several of the detainees began to cooperate with the Obion County District Attorney and with special prosecutors

²⁷² "Offers Reward for Hickman Murderers," *Courier-Journal*, Oct. 13, 1908.

²⁷³ Vanderwood, *Night Riders*, 43-47. See also Vandiver, *Lethal Punishment*, 111-12.

²⁷⁴ Vanderwood, *Night Riders*, 73.

brought in at the request of Tennessee's Governor Malcolm R. Patterson.²⁷⁵ One of the detainees was a 25-year old man named Frank Fehringer, whose family was from Obion County, but who had become a notorious bootlegger and petty gunslinger in Fulton County.²⁷⁶ Fehringer told the investigators that he had been the Night Riders' leader on the nights that both Rankin and the Walkers were killed. Given immunity from prosecution in Tennessee in exchange for his testimony, Fehringer soon became the State's chief witness in a trial against eight men charged with the first degree murder of Quentin Rankin.²⁷⁷

From the date Rankin's death was first reported, all media attention shifted to the Tennessee murder case. Although the Walker murders were raised in numerous court documents prior to trial, only a few newspapers commented on the connection to the Walkers.²⁷⁸ As the lead case and two other related cases moved forward through the appeals and retrial process, the story of what had happened to the Walkers in Kentucky faded from the public eye. Not surprisingly, the *Hickman Courier* never mentioned the Walkers again. In its annual listing of important events for the year 1908, the paper noted

²⁷⁵ Vanderwood, *Night Riders*, 79.

²⁷⁶ "For Bootlegging," *Hickman Courier*, Feb. 1, 1907; "Frank Ferriner [*sic*] Caught," *Hickman Courier*, Dec. 20, 1907; uncaptioned news item, *Hickman Courier*, Jan. 24, 1908.

²⁷⁷ Vanderwood, *Night Riders*, 75-76.

²⁷⁸ See, e.g., State of Tennessee's Answers to Writs of Habeas Corpus filed (and currently maintained) in the Circuit Court of Obion County, dated Nov. 6, 1908, stating that, prior to the murder of Rankin and attempt to assassinate Taylor, "said outlaws had gone over into Kentucky at night and assassinated a negro man, Dave Walker, his wife and two children." And see "Bail for Men in Local Jail," *Tennessean*, Nov. 12, 1908; "Fight for Release," *Houston (TX) Post*, Nov. 12, 1908.

the murder of Quentin Rankin in Obion County as well as the murders of several white men in Fulton County during the month of October, but skipped entirely the murders of the Walker family just outside of Hickman.²⁷⁹

The Fulton County Grand Jury, however, did its job. During the May term of 1909, twelve white men sitting on the Fulton County Grand Jury made the collective decision to indict Frank Fehringer for the “willful murder” of the four dead members of the Walker family.²⁸⁰ The indictments remained on the Commonwealth docket at least through April 28, 1910, when they were noted as having been set for the current term of court.²⁸¹ Unfortunately, Fehringer was never tried for the murders. The reasons why are complicated. Fehringer was required to remain under the jurisdiction of the Tennessee courts for as long as it was necessary to resolve all the Rankin murder cases. Only then could Kentucky have extradited him to Fulton County for trial in the Walker murders. While awaiting the trials in Tennessee, the court gave Fehringer approval to get married and leave West Tennessee. Shortly after the wedding, the couple moved to Chattanooga, where Fehringer then attempted to murder his wife and kill himself.²⁸² Fehringer was tried in Chattanooga and found guilty of felonious assault, for which he

²⁷⁹ “A Digest of Important Happenings in Hickman for the Year 1908,” *Hickman Courier*, Dec. 31, 1908.

²⁸⁰ “Circuit Court Notes,” *Hickman Courier*, May 20, 1909, refer to Fehringer having been charged with “complicity.” All later court reports refer to “willful murder.” See “Some Court News,” *Hickman Courier*, Sept. 2, 1909; “Circuit Court,” *Hickman Courier*, Jan. 20, 1910.

²⁸¹ “Fulton Circuit Court Docket,” *Hickman Courier*, Apr. 28, 1910.

²⁸² “Frank Attempts Suicide,” *Hickman Courier*, July 12, 1910.

received a two-year prison sentence.²⁸³ Records show that his release date from prison was October 18, 1911, a full three years after the Walkers' deaths.²⁸⁴ By then, the Rankin trials and appeals were over, with a final dismissal having been entered on May 25, 1911.²⁸⁵ There is no further record of Fehringer's whereabouts apart from one note that he "reportedly moved to St. Louis, Missouri, and never reappeared at Reelfoot Lake."²⁸⁶

Although two other men ultimately admitted to having been present at the Walker farm on the night of October 3, 1908, trial without Fehringer would have been difficult and would likely have led to the same resolution as the Tennessee cases.²⁸⁷ Despite spending two years of time, money, and effort to indict 90 men and conduct three trials (two of which resulted in hung juries) as well as one complicated appeal, the State of Tennessee never secured a final conviction against a single Night Rider for the murder of Quentin Rankin.²⁸⁸ There is no reason to believe a different result would have been reached in a trial against Fehringer and his cohorts for the murder of the Walkers.

²⁸³ "Frank Gets Two Years," *Hickman Courier*, Oct. 27, 1910.

²⁸⁴ "Confessed Night Rider Tries to Kill Himself," *Courier-Journal*, Nov. 19, 1910; Biennial Report of the Board of Prison Commissioners of the State of Tennessee, 1911-1912, v. 9, p. 199.

²⁸⁵ See Docket Entry dated May 25, 1911, in Obion County Circuit Court Docket Book K, Page 443 (located at the Obion County Courthouse, Union City, TN).

²⁸⁶ Vanderwood, *Night Riders*, 143. Vanderwood's report was apparently based on interviews conducted in 1956 with Night Riders Bud Morris and Fred Pinion.

²⁸⁷ The two men were Ed Marshall and Ethelbert Rogers. See "Marshall on Stand," *New Orleans (LA) Times Democrat*, Jan. 26, 1909; Vanderwood, *Night Riders*, 127.

²⁸⁸ Vanderwood, *Night Riders*, 140; Hayes, *Historic Reelfoot Lake Region*, 323.

What are we to take away from a close examination of the Walker murders? Should we even call it a lynching? It is clearly one of the most horrific murders ever in the Tri-Counties. It is the only lynching incident involving a woman and children, and it is one of the very few to provide a window into the lives of both the victims and the members of the mob. In every other lynching, with only one or two exceptions, the victims were ciphers most often characterized as “brutes” or “black beasts,” and the members of the mobs were “masked men,” or, just as often without masks, “unrecognized.” By contrast, in this case we know that Dave Walker was the only African American among 56 lynching victims who was a landowner. Indeed, he was a relatively prosperous landowner and farmer living near his father, who was also a landowner and an established member of the community -- a community in which Ned Walker continued to live long after his son’s family was murdered. Unlike all the other lynchings, we also know the names of at least a dozen of the men who rode with the Night Riders, and we know the name of the man who led the mob as well as the names of at least three other men who were in the mob that killed the Walkers and destroyed their property. These men were not the Walkers’ neighbors; indeed, many of them were not even from Fulton County. They terrorized the entire area -- not simply the black community. They whipped white men and women and lynched one white man in the most literal sense of the word. On the night the Walkers were murdered, the Night Riders were no more than drunken thugs out for a night on the town after hearing that the State had been unable to convict some of their gang for the same behavior they were about to

engage in. It was to have been a night like all the others. They didn't expect Dave Walker to fight back.

This lynching, if indeed it can be called a lynching, stands out because unlike every other lynching in the Tri-Counties it was not committed in service to some misguided higher law. It was rank first degree murder. Other lynch mobs may have justified their actions by claiming they were ridding the community of criminals and "bad negroes." There was no justification for what happened to the Walkers.

CHAPTER V THE RULE OF LAW

The Role Of Anti-Lynching Legislation And Capital Punishment

It is perhaps no coincidence that there were grand jury investigations of virtually all the lynchings in Fulton County which occurred after 1891. There are several possible explanations. It may have been because Fulton County's Judge Bunk Gardner and the governors of Kentucky, particularly Augustus E. Willson and Augustus Owsley Stanley (1915-1919), took a dim view of lynchings and actively campaigned against mob violence. It may also be because the people of Fulton County had discovered that, despite the opinion page of the *Hickman Courier*, legal execution, as in the case of Lev James in 1891, was more socially responsible and less fraught with bad publicity than lynchings.²⁸⁹ It may also be attributable to the fact that the Commonwealth of Kentucky was one of the first southern states to pass an anti-lynching statute.

First enacted in May 1897, the Kentucky anti-lynching law contained a provision prohibiting "persons from banding themselves together for the purpose of injuring or disturbing another," as well as a provision placing responsibility for upholding the law squarely on the shoulders of judges, sheriffs, and other peace officers. The latter

²⁸⁹ Lev James was hanged in Hickman. Electrocution replaced hanging as the method of state-sponsored execution in 1910. By necessity, all legal executions after 1910 were conducted at the state penitentiary at Eddyville, Kentucky. By 1912, thirteen men were on death row. According to the *Hickman Courier*, "This is said to be the largest number of men ever under sentence of death at one time in Kentucky." The *Courier* speculated that the death penalty was being imposed more often because the sentences were not being carried out in the counties where the crime occurred. "No More Hangings in Kentucky," *Hickman Courier*, Mar. 31, 1910; "Thirteen in Death House," *Hickman Courier*, May 30, 1912.

provision, referred to as Section Six, included a hefty fine as well as forfeiture of office upon conviction for failure to enforce the statute.²⁹⁰ Although Section Six was deleted by amendment in 1902, every lynching after the legal execution of Lev James in 1891, with one exception, was at least investigated by a grand jury.²⁹¹ Fulton County, which never had a mass mob lynching, even indicted several men for their roles in lynchings (though no one was ever convicted). Just the threat of prosecution may have served as a deterrent to would-be lynchers, and the last lynching in that county took place in 1918.

Unlike Fulton County, it appears that only three out of 40 lynchings in Obion or Lake County were ever investigated by law enforcement. The first investigation involved the lynching incident at Madrid Bend in 1869, which was also the first recorded lynching incident in the Tri-Counties; the second was the result of Quentin Rankin's highly politicized murder; and the third involved the last lynching in the Tri-Counties, that of George Smith in 1931, which was also politicized through the involvement of the NAACP.

One reason why there were no grand jury investigations may have been because lynchings, in Obion County at least, seem to have involved far more community participation than the lynchings in Fulton County and perhaps even Lake County. Many of the mobs in Obion County reportedly numbered in the hundreds, and crowds, particularly after 1900, were often said to include up to one thousand people. News

²⁹⁰ Laws 1897, p. 32, ch. 20, cited in *Commonwealth v. Patrick*, 127 Ky. 475, 105 S. W. 981 (Ky. Ct. App., 1907).

²⁹¹ Wright, *Racial Violence in Kentucky*, 181-182. Not surprisingly, the one exception was a sexual assault case -- the 1904 lynching of Joseph Bumpass, a black man, alleged to have attempted the sexual assault of a fifteen year old white girl. See pp. 105-107.

reports do not mention whether those responsible for the actual act of lynching were masked, which suggests that they were not. It seems likely that those directly involved in public lynchings during daylight hours did not fear community censure. It further indicates a certain degree of community approval, or, at a minimum, community acquiescence.

Also, significantly, Tennessee did not enact (and indeed has never enacted) an anti-lynching statute. Although some sources refer to anti-lynching statutes having been passed in Kentucky, Tennessee, and Texas in 1897, the Tennessee version was actually a whitecap statute. Ironically, the Tennessee law was enacted as the result of violence among whites in certain communities in East Tennessee, and my research has revealed no incidents of the statute ever being used to prosecute whites for lynching African Americans.²⁹² Tennessee did pass a statute much like Section Six of the Kentucky statute, requiring sheriffs actively to resist mobs trying to take jail prisoners from custody, but a search of Tennessee case law revealed only one case in which the statute was used against a sheriff overpowered by a white mob. That one case arose under highly unusual circumstances in the United States Supreme Court and involved the volatile 1906 lynching in Chattanooga of a young black man named Ed Johnson.²⁹³

²⁹² Kathy Bennett, "Lynching," *Tennessee Encyclopedia*, <https://tennesseeencyclopedia.net/entries/lynching/>; William Joseph Cummings, "Community, Violence, and the Nature of Change: Whitecapping in Sevier County, Tennessee, During the 1890's," Master's Thesis, University of Tennessee, 1998, https://trace.tennessee.edu/utk_gradthes/8, accessed Feb. 20, 2020.

²⁹³ Tenn. Code Ann. § 8-8-211 (1881); *United States v. Shepp*, 214 U. S. 386 (1909); Mark Curriden and Leroy Phillips, *Contempt of Court: The Turn-of-the-Century Lynching That Launched a Hundred Years of Federalism* (New York: Anchor Books, 2001).

In fact, lynchings in Tennessee seemed entirely consistent with Confederate values and the male code of conduct. Lynching simply was not equated with murder by many in the white community. Murder was against the law; attacking police officers and raping women (at least white women) was against the law; but the law was silent in Tennessee when it came to lynching. It is as though by labelling collective killings “lynchings,” the perpetrators were exonerated of murder.

The Beginning Of Change In the Twentieth Century

Although lynchings continued in the Tri-Counties during the early decades of the 20th century, there were inklings that the formerly lenient attitude of the white community toward crime in general was changing. This included whites’ attitudes toward African Americans who had been compelled to rely on self defense in order to save themselves. In December 1911, three years after David Walker and his family were murdered in their home, Raul Barfield, a black tenant farmer living in the bottom below Hickman, was attacked in his home by two white men on Christmas night. Barfield shot and killed the invaders, Frank and Louis Ramsey. Although there was “strong talk of lynching,” no mob ever formed and Barfield was taken to Paducah, Kentucky, for safekeeping. According to the *Hickman Courier*, the attack on Barfield may have been part of the ongoing effort to drive black tenant farmers out of the bottoms:

There has been more or less friction because certain white men objected to negroes being employed on bottom plantations. Numerous notices have been posted warning both land owners and their negroes.

One letter posted on a tree near one of the plantations read:

Mr. Land Owner, we will advise you that you cannot work niggers in 1912. Try it old nigger. What would you think if you was to go asleep some night and never wake up. Better let this stay here.²⁹⁴

Barfield was indicted by the grand jury and remained in Paducah until shortly before his trial. Meanwhile, citizens of Fulton County appealed to the governor for militia in the event of a “threatened race riot.” Regional newspapers reported that African Americans in the bottoms were supposedly “arming themselves, and if the threatened riot takes place, the planters will undoubtedly be found defending their black employees.”²⁹⁵

It does not appear that the governor ever sent troops, and Barfield was taken back to Hickman for his trial in early May. At the time, the *Paducah Sun-Democrat* noted that Barfield had “made an ideal prisoner, and has much more intelligence than the average member of his race. He is known in Hickman as a thrifty colored citizen, and has many white people interested in his defense.” On May 11, after a two-day trial, Barfield, who remarkably had already been acquitted for the death of one of the Ramsey brothers, was sentenced to 10 years in the penitentiary in the death of the other Ramsey brother.

²⁹⁴ “Two Men Killed,” *Hickman Courier*, Jan. 4, 1912. See discussion of 1915 night riding reports at pp. 42-45.

²⁹⁵ “A Race Riot In Kentucky,” *Herald and Mail* (Columbia, TN), Feb. 9, 1912.

The court immediately granted a new trial on the basis of an error in the jury instructions. There is no subsequent mention of a retrial in regional newspapers.²⁹⁶

Another Fulton County case several years later suggests that whites were no longer willing to excuse other whites who murdered black men without provocation. In 1922, the Fulton County sheriff received an anonymous letter stating that Will Whitson, a white farmer at Madrid Bend, had murdered a black tenant farmer named Amos Taylor and buried him near Whitson's home. The sheriff investigated and located the body. Whitson, who had been charged in 1911 with the malicious shooting of a white man, was considered a violent man and known bootlegger. Probably because of his criminal history, the Law and Order League of Fulton County took the unusual step of hiring a private attorney to assist the Commonwealth's attorney in prosecuting Whitson for the murder of a black man. Whitson received a life sentence. The proof against Whitson was overwhelming. Witnesses forced to help bury Taylor testified that not only had Whitson killed Taylor, he had also buried him while he was still alive. In upholding the sentence, the Kentucky Court of Appeals stated that the Commonwealth's evidence demonstrated that the crime was "a foul, brutal and indefensible assassination."²⁹⁷

²⁹⁶ "A Race Riot In Kentucky," *Herald and Mail*, Feb. 9, 1912; "Negro Barfield Will Be Placed On Trial Tomorrow," *Paducah Sun-Democrat*, May 6, 1912; "Given Ten-Year Sentence," *Tennessean*, May 12, 1912.

²⁹⁷ "Another Fatal Shooting At Madrid Bend," *Hickman Courier*, May 25, 1911; "Whitson Gets Life Sentence," *Hickman Courier*, Sept. 28, 1922; "Foul and Brutal Assassination, Will Whitson Life Sentence Affirmed -- Charged With Murder Of Negro Tenant," *Lexington Herald-Leader*, Feb. 16, 1923.

Even Obion County began to show a willingness to rely upon its criminal justice system in responding to violent crimes involving African Americans as long as they were not sex-related. In 1922, two black men, Joe Bailey and Henry (“Babe”) Williams, were actually tried and sentenced for the killing of a Union City police officer named Dave Yates. According to reports, Yates was responding to a disturbance call in “the negro quarter” (also known as “Black Bottom”) of Union City on December 4, 1922, when Williams and Bailey opened fire on him. Yates died at the scene. Williams was jailed immediately and Bailey was captured after bloodhounds tracked him to Tiptonville.

Both were moved to other jails for safekeeping pending trial, although there are no reports of mobs gathering either before or after their trials. The two men were tried together six weeks after their arrests, and, on January 22, 1923, both were sentenced to be electrocuted on February 27. Each man claimed the other had been responsible for shooting Yates. Both were drunk at the time. Williams’s case was reversed by the court of appeals, but Bailey’s was affirmed. Plans were made for Bailey’s execution, but Bailey’s attorneys applied for a commutation. The governor gave Bailey a reprieve until after Williams’s case could be retried. The retrial resulted in a hung jury, and was again set for trial. The trial finally took place in May 1924, and Williams was convicted of accessory after the fact and given a 20 year sentence. The governor, upon recommendation of three justices of the Tennessee Supreme Court, commuted Bailey’s sentence to life imprisonment. In doing so, he stated that he was convinced a reasonable doubt existed as to Bailey’s guilt of first degree murder. The governor’s commutation stated: “While that conscientious doubt exists I cannot permit the life of this man to be

taken. This view of my own is fully confirmed by this recommendation from the Supreme Court.”²⁹⁸ Research suggests this was the first time a black man had been indicted, tried, and convicted for the murder of a white man in Obion County.

²⁹⁸ “Posse Seeks Negro,” *Montgomery (AL) Advertiser*, Dec. 6, 1922; “Night Police Officer Dave Yates Murdered,” *Commercial Courier*, Dec. 8, 1922; “Negro Slayer Is Caught After Bloodhound Chase,” *Dunklin Democrat* (Kennett, MO), Dec. 15, 1922; “Two Negroes Get Death Penalty At Union City, Tennessean, Jan. 23, 1923; *Journal and Tribune* (Knoxville, TN), Oct. 3, 1923; “Reprieve Granted In Case Of Joe Bailey,” *Tennessean*, Oct. 16, 1923; “Jury in Union City Murder Case Still Out,” *Tennessean*, Jan. 25, 1924; “Gov. May Commute Negro Death Sentence,” *Johnson City (TN) Chronicle*, May 30, 1924.

CHAPTER VI CONCLUSIONS

In an area with a relatively small African American population, a population which posed little or no threat to white socio-economic status, what purpose did lynchings serve? The criteria used by Tolnay and Beck, as well as Bailey and Tolnay, hold up for the Cotton Belt, where the objective of lynching may have been to keep a large black population under white control and to keep blacks from becoming upwardly mobile. But, if that were the case in the Tri-Counties, the lynchings would have been more random in intent, more clustered in time, and carried out more publicly. Lynchings would also have continued well into the 20th century, as they did in the Cotton Belt. Instead, lynchings in the Tri-Counties were never random, and most were carried out late at night without witnesses, without ceremony, and scattered over a period of roughly forty years. They also essentially ended after 1910.

It seems likely that lynching as a practice faded earlier in the Tri-Counties than in the Cotton Belt because it was not driven by socio-economic factors but simply by a lust for violence combined with a uniquely Southern code of conduct built on notions of honor and natural law. Guerrilla tactics, developed to an art form in the Civil War and its aftermath, were useful in uniting men to enforce this code of conduct by carrying out what were, in reality, highly personal acts of revenge.

For men accustomed to operating in clandestine groups and comfortable with a level of violence unthinkable in today's world, mob action -- with or without masks -- must have come as second nature. Lynching was a matter of justice, unconstrained by the

law, to be meted out to whites and blacks alike who transgressed the unspoken code of white male conduct by committing dishonorable acts, and to black men specifically for assaults on white women. White men might kill each other over matters of pride and honor, and they might do what they liked to white women; but, as the letter of J. R. Hawkins and the editorial comments of the *Hickman Courier* and Union City newspapers made abundantly clear throughout the years, the code of male conduct did not extend to black men.

Over time, especially after the turn of the century, lynching as a form of justice was singled out for use against black men who in some way challenged racial supremacy and exclusivity. White men, who were well acquainted with violence among themselves, who had been steeped in violence since the days of the Civil War, who had engaged in guerrilla warfare in the aftermath of the war, and who begrudged blacks for being the cause of that war, simply would not tolerate blacks physically harming or even threatening to harm whites. As long as the small black population stayed in its place -- largely out of sight unless they were needed to work in the fields -- they were tolerated. But when they stepped out of place, into the white world, they were reminded of where they belonged and, in some instances, even forced out of the community. In other words, they were silenced, and lynchings were the ultimate form of silence for those "bad negroes" who failed to keep out of sight and maintain a proper distance from the white population. Once men could be sent away for lengthy prison sentences and the electric chair became available, lynching was simply no longer necessary.

Underlying the motivation to silence the black community was a profound disdain and hatred of African Americans, who both individually and collectively symbolized a Confederate defeat which still resonated well into the 20th century. It is a striking coincidence that Obion County erected its first Confederate memorial in 1869, the year of that county's first lynchings, and a second memorial in 1909, shortly after the murders of the David Walker family in Fulton County and the Stineback brothers in Lake County. Fulton County also raised two Confederate memorials in the early 1900s -- one in 1902, the same year Bill Dooley was murdered by a Fulton police officer, and the other in 1913, the year in which John Grinston was lynched on a prominent Union City street corner near the courthouse before a crowd of over 500 people. As those monuments continue to attest even in the 21st century, the Confederacy remained very much alive in the minds of those members of the white community still shrouded in grey and living in the past. In those minds, African Americans also remained very much alive as thorny reminders of the honor and glory they believed was lost in 1865. Best put out of sight -- on the other side of the tracks, in the back of the bus, at a separate school, on the end of a rope, in the electric chair.

APPENDIX LYNCHING VICTIMS

Fulton County, Kentucky

<u>Lynching Date</u>	<u>Name(s)</u>	<u>Race</u>	<u>Stated Reason</u>
June 29, 1877	Jarvis (James) Anderson	White	Thievery
June 9, 1883	Henry Colbert	Black	Att. sexual assault
July 18, 1887	John Vanderford	Black	Sexual assault-child
Sept. 2, 1895	William (Wm) Butcher (Buthcer)	Black	Troublesome drunk
June 26, 1899	Henry Stewart (Stevens)	Black	Murder and robbery
Aug. 19, 1899	John (Squab) Bolin	Black	Murder and robbery
Feb. 14, 1902	Bill (Bell) Dooley (Duly) (Duly Bell)	Black	Assault-peace officer
Aug. 30, 1904	Joseph Bumpass	Black	Att. sex assault-child
Oct. 3, 1908	David (Dave) Walker (Wallace, Wallace Davis) Annie (died 2 days later) Susan (age 16) Ransey (age 2)	Black Black Black Black	Resistance
May 20, 1917	Lawrence Dempsey (Laurence Dempsey)	Black	Murder of RR officer
Dec. 14, 1918	Charles (Charlie) Lewis	Black	Assault-peace officer

Obion County, Tennessee

Nov. 22, 1869	Henry Lewis	Black	Murder and resistance
	John Isaacs (Jones)	Black	Murder and resistance
	Alfred Robinson	Black	Murder and resistance
	2 Unnamed men	Black	Murder and resistance

Dec. 19, 1871	David T. Toler Levi Farrington (Edward L. Russel)	White White	Murder-peace officer Murder-peace officer
Mar. 22, 1879	Jerry Ewing	Black	Sexual assault-child
Sept. 5, 1882	Wilson Wade (Winston, Winslow)	Black	Sexual assault
Mar. 10, 1885	Almus (Ambrose) Young (Alinus)	Black	Murder and thievery
Apr. 14, 1885	Charles Latham	Black	Murder and thievery
	Frank Freeman	Black	Murder and thievery
	Bud Farris (Pierson) (Budd) (Farriss)	White	Thievery
	Freeman (Greeman) Ward	Black	Thievery
Dec. 8, 1885	Samuel (Sam) Fowler	Black	Arson and thievery
Mar. 17, 1887	William (Wm, Bill) Hardy	Black	Murder
Apr. 13, 1887	John Thomas	Black	Sexual assault-child
Dec. 8, 1887	Adam Charles	Black	Sexual assault-child
	Andy Miller	Black	Sexual assault-child
	William (Wm) Smith	Black	Sexual assault-child
Mar. 15, 1888	Eli Nary (Davy, Davey) (Davie)	Black	Arson
Oct. 26, 1888	Henry Jones	Black	Murder
Nov. 10, 1891	Joseph (Joe) Mitchell	Black	Att. sex assault-child
Oct. 4, 1891	Alex (Alexander) Bell (Roll, Hall)	Black	Att. sex assault-child
Sept. 10, 1895	Lum Ward (Wood)	Black	Testifying against whites
May 10, 1896	W. H. (Will) Paschall	Black	Murder-peace officer
May 22, 1898	Joseph (Joe) Mitchell	Black	Murder

Apr. 9, 1902	Thomas (Tom) Blackard (Blambard, Blanchard)	White	Murder-peace officer
Oct. 20, 1908	Quentin Rankin (Quintin, Quinten)	White	Reelfoot Lake scheme
Mar. 21, 1913	John Gretson (Grenson) (Gredson, Grinston, Gregson)	Black	Murder
Apr. 18, 1931	George Smith	Black	Att. sexual assault

Lake County, Tennessee

July 25, 1881	Felix (Felxi) Wyley (Wylie)	Black	Murder & sex assault
Apr. 11, 1888	Jerry Smith	Black	Att. sex assault-child
Nov. 27, 1898	1 Unnamed man	Black	Murder
Nov. 29, 1898	1 Unnamed man	Black	Murder
Oct. 3, 1900	Early Williams	Black	Murder and robbery
Mar. 16, 1901	Ike (Isaac) Fitzgerald (Fitzergald)	Black	Sexual assault
Aug. 15, 1907	Will Clifford (Flippin)	Black	Murder & sex assault
Nov. 23, 1908	Marshall Steinback (Stineback, Steinbach, Sanberg, Stainback)	Black	Murder-peace officer
	Ed (Robert) Steinback (Edward)	Black	Murder-peace officer
	Jim (James, Tee) Steinback (Tenner, Tennes)	Black	Murder-peace officer
Sept. 13, 1910	Bob Bruce (McSpadden)	Black	Att. sex assault-child
	Will (Wm) Sharp (Sharpe)	Black	Att. sex assault-child

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 Deed reference to Willie Walker as property owner, Deed Book 31, Page 111;
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